

Blessedness, holiness and the saints of the Church

*Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison at All Saints' Church, Nottingham,
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All Saints' Day is traditionally the festival in the Church's year when all those who have lived a Christian life here on earth and have reached heaven are commemorated and celebrated. This means not only the saints who have been named specifically by the Church, but all those whose lives have been lived in accordance with the ways of Christ. These are sometimes described as the Church Triumphant – the communion of all the saints in heaven – contrasted with the Church Militant – the Church here on earth, the community of Christians still on their way to their eternal destination in heaven. In some Protestant churches, however, All Saints' Day tends to be a celebration of all Christians both on earth and in heaven. At All Saints' tide, then, we think about and give thanks for all those who gone before us in the way of faith. This means all those who have led holy lives – for that, at its heart – is what the idea of sainthood really means; those who have dedicated their lives to God, those who have done their best to follow the ways of Christ.

When we ask what living a good Christian life - living a life, in other words, of holiness - should involve, we can't do much better than looking at the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and in particular the so-called Beatitudes, which are one of the main sources of guidance on how Jesus expected his followers to live. Today's reading from the Gospel according to St Matthew, which we have just heard, sets out clearly how Jesus understood what it meant to be blessed; there is a similar passage in the Gospel according to St Luke.

The word 'Beatitude' refers to the state of being blessed or supremely happy; it is about true happiness, not just pleasure. I should mention that there are some subtle but quite important differences between the descriptions of blessedness contained in St Matthew's gospel compared with the gospel of St Luke; we need somehow to hold both of these interpretations together as we seek the real meaning of blessedness as taught by Jesus. So, for example, Jesus tells us that there is the blessedness which arises from being 'poor in spirit' (or simply 'poor', as in St Luke); this is about knowing our need of God, our dependence on God; being aware of our spiritual shortcomings and the need for God's grace to help make up for these.

He then describes the blessedness that is associated with mourning, or being sorrowful. This is a difficult one, as it suggests, at first sight, that mourning and being sorrowful are somehow good. However, it's more to do with the loving, caring, and renewing touch of God which can sustain us and support us in times of loss and grief, as well as helping us to be more able to help others in their times of sadness. Then there is blessedness which comes from gentleness, meekness, and humility; and the blessedness which comes when we have a forgiving, merciful, accepting, non-judgemental attitude towards those around us. Jesus also describes the blessedness that comes when we have a passion for righteousness; for seeing justice prevail between individuals, and within communities and nations. Then there is the blessedness of a pure heart – a heart made pure by integrity of life, simplicity of living, a clear conscience. Jesus then talks of the blessedness of those who seek to bring about peace and reconciliation, both among those around them and in the world at large; and the blessedness of those who are prepared to suffer for their faith and their Christian values, the supreme example being of course Christ himself.

In setting out this framework for life, Jesus was setting out an alternative understanding of blessedness from those who saw it as being to do with wealth and riches, status and worldly success, and positions of power and authority over others. His teachings about blessedness were not totally new; they drew upon strands of thinking in earlier Jewish society, which we see at various points in the Old Testament. These teachings were, however, uncomfortable to many people, and that's why they caused many people to oppose Jesus as well as drawing to him a large following from among those who were unhappy with the society and religion of that time.

But what does this all mean for us in the Church today? If the teachings about blessedness contained in the Beatitudes all seem rather beyond us, if they come across as being for real saints and holy people rather than ordinary people like you and me, what should we do? I suggest you remember this; which is that each of the sayings is in some way about 'letting go', and the blessedness which comes from being able to let go. Letting go of an excessive desire for material things; letting go of the desire to get our own back when we have been wronged; letting go of those for whom we mourn; letting go of anger and resentment; and so on. Of course this is not always easy; indeed sometimes very difficult. But each of us can

somehow, in our own way, aim to do this. If we do so, we begin to find that our trust and faith in God more become, little by little, more and more rooted in our own experiences. His grace – renewing, comforting, consoling, strengthening, and reviving – enters our lives more fully. And God’s faithfulness and love for us are revealed to us as not just words, but as the truth - and absolute reality - that they are.

It is rather poignant, although very sad, that the last service in this church for the time being happens to be on Saints’ Day. Maybe it is a particularly good time for us to remember that that holiness doesn’t have to be something spectacular or extraordinary. We must of course not neglect to give thanks for all those saints of the Church who did lead unusually holy lives: lives given in the sacrificial service of others; lives devoted to poverty and prayer; and indeed all those who literally gave their lives because of their faith. Most saints through the years, however, probably lived quite ordinary lives, and to those around them seemed just to be ordinary people. For centuries the Church has been sustained and maintained by such people; those who have lived out their faith by means of small but sincere acts of kindness; those who have cared for church buildings and indeed those who originally built them; people who have remained constant and faithful in prayer for others; those who have developed the gift of discerning God’s purposes and sharing these with their fellow travellers; and all those who have expressed their faith through their work in wider society. Many of these will no doubt have been guided and sustained by all that Jesus taught about blessedness, which is where we began. We live in an age where celebrity status seems to be valued and sought after by so many people; when what seems to matter most to many is the number of supposed friends or ‘likes’ that you have on social media; and when even charitable works are sometimes subverted by a desire to be seen to be doing good rather than the good works themselves. All Saints’ Day, by contrast, reminds us that the life of faith should not involve a craving for glamour or the praise of others. We offer to God our often faltering and inadequate attempts to love one another because loving others, friend and foe, is what God calls us to do; and that’s it. We don’t do it because we want a five star rating in the eyes of others or a fast track route to heaven. And in God’s eyes – who knows? – maybe even the penitent thief, whom Jesus on the cross promised a place in heaven because of the sincerity of his repentance, has just as much a right to be remembered as a saint as anyone else. Amen.