

### Sermon All Saints Day 2023

The full, dramatic, and glorious implications of what we celebrate today are laid out for us in our first reading. The portion from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine is an impressive reading. The imagery is rich. The scene is evocative. And is meant to stir within us wonder, awe, and longing.

The vision of Saint John the Divine takes us to the heavenly court. It is one of several visions in Revelation of the heavenly court. What we hear today recalls an earlier vision of God sitting enthroned, surrounded by the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, and the angelic host. The focus of their attention was the Lamb who had been slain, but was vindicated by God as the one with *power, wealth wisdom, and might honour and glory and blessing*.

In the heavenly scene presented for us today, the assembled throng around God's throne is further extended to include a vast host of people, an innumerable multitude, *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*. The vision is directing us to a truly universal gathering from every part of the globe. We are told they are clothed in white with palm branches in their hands, indicating a celebratory atmosphere. In the chapter *before* this, we learn this throng are the martyrs. Their souls had been under the altar in heaven, and, we are told, *had been slaughtered for the word of God, and for the testimony they had given*. They had asked, *how long?* It was then they were given their white robes and told to *rest a little longer until their number would be complete*.

But in the vision today, the wait is over. The 'great tribulation' – the time of testing, suffering, and violent death - has passed. The vindication they had sought has now been achieved. In the verses that immediately follow our reading their reward is described in terms of almost unimaginable bliss: worshipping God in the temple day and night, free from hunger, thirst, and scorching heat, sheltered by the Lamb, their shepherd, who guides them to springs of living water, where God will wipe away every tear.

It all goes to make for a beautiful and evocative image. But you may be thinking, 'Well, so what? A detailed bible study on some obscure passage from Revelation is sort of missing the mark for a Patronal Festival...' Well, it's no bad thing to linger for a moment at Revelation because Anglicans normally run a mile whenever we encounter it. But I hope you to understand why this text is chosen for this feast day.

Such a clear focus on the martyrs takes us to the origins of this feast day. By the fourth century, there is evidence of a feast for All the Martyrs, those named and unnamed witnesses who died in persecution. By the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, the feast had been extended to All the Saints. Of course, alongside this we recall that 'saint' in the New Testament has a much broader use. It may in fact have been the most common name for the early Christians. But there is something in martyrs that becomes paradigmatic for all Christians. They provide a framework, a template if you like, by which all the saints of God - that is all of us - are to pattern themselves.

The important thing about this template, this framework, is that it points us to *the wide horizon* on which the Christian faith is meant to be lived out. As John's vision reminds us, those who have died for their faith are finally vindicated. But the price they paid cannot be reckoned in earthly terms. The splendour of their witness can only be appreciated from the perspective of eternity. The witness of the martyrs, the price they put on their faith, can only be seen on a horizon much bigger than themselves, much bigger than here and now. As John's vision shows us, their lives, indeed their deaths, *only make sense* when placed against this horizon of hope.

Even for Christians, it is easy to get bogged down in the grind of daily life. We can be consumed by busyness or the sheer monotony of it all. We despair that our faith life can at times appear boring, dull and uninspiring. Nothing much seems to happen. There are no dramatic experiences. We don't 'feel' anything. We can be plagued with troubles, doubts, and uncertainty. And maybe the best we can hope for is to simply turn up and quietly persevere. But through all that John nudges us, points us to something else. *Look, he says. This is what we are made for! This is our destiny. A destiny of splendour and glory, centred on the worship of God.* He is effectively saying that whatever is happening in our life, whatever struggles, whatever doubts and limitations we face, we are meant to place them on the horizon of heaven.

One of the consequences of being embodied creatures is that we are limited. We are finite. But this can mean we seek to limit God as well. We can make God small. We can seek to tame him. We can restrict the work and action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We say we are too old. Too ingrained in our habits. Too much of a sinner. Too busy. Too tired. Too distracted. We become expert at keeping God at arms' length. And so, we keep God small, contained, limited. Our focus becomes narrow. We place our lives on a small horizon.

But not the saints. This is why a celebration not just of the martyrs but of all the saints is so important. Saints, in the technical sense: those holy ones of God, who enjoy already the vision of God. They are important because, like the martyrs in John's vision, their lives are set on the *wide horizon*. The saints are those who allowed the encounter with God to be wild and extravagant, to be total. Not tame. Not mild. Not benign and harmless. But an adventure into unknown territory and with dangerous possibilities. Like the martyrs in the heavenly vision, the saints are those whose lives do not make sense on the horizon of here and now.

This is why the witness of the saints is so important. Why our celebration today is so important. Why knowing them - becoming familiar with these men and women and even children - is so important. Why they should become our friends. Because in the saints we see that *a wild, big, adventurous faith is possible!* If we befriend them, they will help take us toward that wide horizon. We should not be content for the saints to be either strange or stranger. Because their world is one *we* are meant to inhabit.

Saint Bernard – the 12th century abbot and mystic, in a sermon for this feast - asks an important question, *'Why should our praise and glorification, or even the celebration of this feast day mean anything to the saints? What do they care about earthly honours when their heavenly Father honours them by fulfilling the faithful promise of the Son? What does our commendation mean to them? The saints have no need of honour from us; neither does our devotion add the slightest thing to what is theirs. Clearly, if we venerate their memory, it serves us, not them. But I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning.'*

We remember the saints, we celebrate their lives and witness, to arouse in us a longing. Not just to be *like* them but to be *with* them. Sometimes we make a false distinction when we imagine there are two churches. A church militant here on earth, and a church triumphant in glory. But there are not two churches, one here below, and another in heaven. Because Christ is One, the Church (his Body) is One. As we confess in the creed, *I believe in One, holy, Catholic, and apostolic church.* And as the Collect for this feast reminds us: God has knit together his *elect into one communion and fellowship.*

The saints are not just role models for Christian living. They do not just give us an example. They are meant to be our friends. Indeed, we are meant to see them as our family. We belong to them. They are our people. To know them, to become familiar with them, will help draw our sights past the here and now. Know them, and they will guide us to an horizon of wonder, awe and praise. Amen.