

All Saints Day, 1st November 2020, All Saints Church Hereford.

Let me begin by saying that this year marks the 50th anniversary of my ordination as a priest. I am very grateful to Ruth for making it possible for me to mark it by celebrating and preaching this morning.

After missing the actual date, Trinity Sunday, because of lockdown cramp, I was tempted to let the anniversary go. But then I felt it was important to express my gratitude for the gift that priesthood has been to me and for the opportunities of presenting the reality of God in Jesus Christ to others, through hosting those games and rituals which we call sacraments and that help us make sense of life in its heights and depths. Our Lord called us to remember, what he did at the last supper and in that spirit I remember many occasions of beauty, of music and gesture, of illuminating or inspiring words, of intense listening and sharing. As well as the ministry of healing hands and psychotherapy.

You all know how the ministry of the priest, at its best, enables us to come into the Lord's presence . . . so that we may return to ordinary life strengthened. We all share in this, priests and lay people alike. The line from the hymn about the saints resting from their labours misleads us by suggesting that true holiness and true rest in the Lord are on the other side of death, separate from life. This is contradicted, and corrected, by that petition in the Lord's prayer that God's will may be done *on earth as in heaven*.

It is also contradicted by our readings, from the Book of Revelation and St Matthew. The first is one of several in that book which qualify our often overly serious attitude by providing images of celebration.

Before I move to the Beatitudes, let me make a little detour. I referred to my memories of leading and enabling acts of worship which were meaningful - as the Risen Lord was manifested among us. Some marked by quiet intensity others marked by more of a party spirit, were joyous and celebratory - in all we shared in his presence and his peace. At such moments, we share in the life of God and God shares God's life with us. Which is why we return to ordinary life different from when we came in.

As we share in these moments, and build on them by living out the values of the new life of the Kingdom in actions of various kinds, we are living out the holiness and love of God in the world. That is what saints do. That is what we, you and I, do. Sanctity is not only seen in the heroic figures whom we rightly venerate; it is also expressed in our faithful living that flows from our encounter with our Risen Lord. This is visible in some distinctive ways of speaking and doing. But it is also visible, elusively and intangibly, in the character and atmosphere of faithful disciples.

Consider your own experience of the ways your own behaviour and choices has been influenced by your faith . . . Even our embarrassment at the moments when we failed to act or choose well are indications of how we have been shaped by our relationship with God and God's ways.

What clarifies this is comparing the values of the Beatitudes with those shown by the characters that the world admires, honours and glamourises. A recurring element in these are varieties of force and violence. In the Beatitudes Jesus comprehensively overturns these forms of admiration and valuation. This is graphically clear in his use of the word meek. To appreciate it, remember that it is used by the Old Testament prophecy which Jesus enacted on Palm Sunday: "lo, your king comes meekly before you riding on an ass." The contrast between the kingdom of this world and the one that Jesus inaugurates and which we participate in is great. Part of the compromise of that the Church has made with the world has been its identification with empire and its violent ways, most shockingly of all, in the slave trade.

The significance of the Beatitudes is shown in the examples of those who have suffered most from the worldly powers or who have spoken up for them. I recall angry mothers campaigning on issues of their neighbourhood, the thirst for righteousness of Trevor Huddleston and Martin Luther King and the patient endurance of Rosa Parks and countless others. You will recall others who have impressed you.

For many such people suffering was unavoidable but in their glimpse of God's kingdom, they knew it was not the last word. God's kingdom does not come through the violence of acquisitiveness and competitiveness. It comes, as the

Christmas story pictures for us, in stillness and quietness of heart and the behaviours that flow out of that.

The beatitudes, one commentator suggests, are addressed to the believing Christian community. *They* are being affirmed for their faithful living, shown in these unworldly qualities of gentleness, compassion, unselfishness and questing after God's reign on earth. They and we are blessed as we live like this because we come to share more fully in the life of God and God's life is made present through our commitment to live, not out of grasping and focussing on ourselves, not out of fighting and rivalry, but out of that shalom, that wholeness, out of the richness of God's peace made manifest when people live together in harmony and our hearts are no longer restless because they rest in the Lord.