

All Saints' Day
Year A - 1/11/2020

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10,22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I find this to be an interesting choice of Gospel passage for the Feast Day of All Saints' today. On the one hand, I wonder why we don't have a more sort of uplifting passage - something that showcases the faith and witness of those we might first think of as Saints - Peter, Andrew, James, John, for example.

And yet I understand it also - these are not the only Saints we celebrate, but also the lesser known and the almost ignored ones. But then, what about a Gospel passage that has Jesus exhorting us to lives of sacrifice and service - familiar words like "take up your cross and follow me", or salutatory warnings about seeds needing to die in order to bear fruit.

Instead we have this most curious circumstance where Jesus is addressing a whole lot of people who were down and out; essentially prisoners in their own country, labouring under Roman rule; and to these people mired in dispossession, misery and hopelessness, he says... 'Blessed are you to find yourselves broken. You're the lucky ones... because the doorway to God's abundant life lies here... in this experience.'

'Blessed are the broken ones...' Somehow we've turned the Beatitudes into a statement of comfort... that is, we like to hear them. But when you stop and listen to what Jesus is actually saying, it's outrageous.

'Be happy when you're poor... when you've got nothing. (3)

You're blessed in the times of bitter grief and loneliness. (4)

How fortunate are you when people render you invisible... when you're at the bottom of the heap.. (5)

When you're heart-broken at the corruption and injustice of church and society but no-one listens to a word you say... That's the best place to be. (6)

Especially when they turn on you for trying to speak. And when they spread false gossip about you and dump all manner of bile on you. Rejoice and be glad! (11)

Can you hear what he's doing? He's describing experiences that we would consider our worst nightmare, the sorts of experiences we desperately try to avoid, and saying 'Pay attention here because these are the places where blessing... where new life... emerges.'

And if we're being honest, surely our first response is to say 'What??? I don't get it.' This is incredibly challenging and difficult teaching. But it would seem that the tradition has something to teach us here - by selecting this Gospel for All Saints Day. So the Beatitudes have something to do with the process of grace, through which God transforms us from our tarnished humanity into the glory of saints. This is about how and where we are changed...

We often use Eucharistic imagery to describe this transformation process... Just as in the Eucharist, bread is offered, blessed, broken and shared, so our life is offered to God... to be blessed, broken and shared. This is a way of describing how God takes lives always prone to self-focus and fear and turns them into something generous and wonderful... lives that become a blessing for all around them.

All of this sounds good... indeed lovely... until once again we ask the awkward question, 'Yes, but what does that mean?' Particularly difficult is this business of being broken. What does it mean that God breaks us?

1. First of all, rid your mind of any sense of God hurting us or punishing us in this movement. It is not breaking as in 'wantonly smashing up' or 'obliterating'... but

rather a process of 'breaking us open' as one 'breaks down walls' in order to set the prisoner free... as one 'breaks through the curtain of darkness' in order that there may be light. God breaks us open to reveal new possibility, new vision, new wonders... new life! God's breaking open shatters the prison bars of fear, insecurity and self-loathing in order that we may be free of that old shell and live the life of blessing... So this divine breaking is for our liberation... and is in order that all God's blessings, held in store for us, may now flow.

2. It is wonderful... but it is none the less, breaking... and thus involves loss and pain. God does not need to organise this specially for us - the breaking comes naturally and inevitably through ordinary life. It comes through all those ordinary experiences that we'd rather avoid - grief, emptiness, loneliness, failure, disappointment, rejection, unjust treatment. All that ordinary stuff of life that leaves us broken-hearted - crisis, breakdown, depression, collapse, failed relationships. This is the process of life through which we are broken.

So, to return again to the words of the Beatitudes; Jesus is saying that these experiences that we'd rather deny, these bottom of the heap experiences, are actually the places to pay attention, indeed to embrace, because they are the doorways into blessing and abundant life. Whereas all those experiences we crave for - power, success, affluence, status etc - are actually dead-ends and lead nowhere... not for us or the people we love.

We know that that such breaking experiences can often lead to death rather than to life - to bitterness, alienation, hopelessness, mental illness and even suicide. So how is it that in Jesus' vision they can become blessings?

Again, our Eucharistic imagery helps... we're talking about lives that are offered, blessed, broken and shared. There are two things that I can see open these experiences to God's grace and allows them to be turned to blessing.

1. We need to be conscious in these experiences... in the sense that we embrace them... pay attention to them. If we are unconscious to them, or deny them, pretending it's not really happening, then they're toxic for us. Instead we need to own them, name them, accept them... that is be honest with them and about them. Honesty is crucial to both our prayer and our self-talk... 'Yes God, this is the experience of my life. It is like this...'

2. And rather than becoming obsessed with fixing them or escaping them, we need instead to offer them to God. I can only express this in the form of simple prayer... 'God... rebuild me... remake me from the bottom up. Open me up, strip me of that old life I cling to so desperately. Use this experience (that I find so painful) as a doorway to a new beginning. May it be a blessing for me... and through me a blessing for all those I love and know.'

In this embracing and offering, the vision of Jesus can become real in our lives. And it is this way that will lead us to Saintly living - in its truest and realest sense.

If you want it to be blessing for you, then pay attention to the tough places in your life... the experiences that leave you defeated and broken. That's where you'll find the doorway. Instead of denying... or avoiding... or escaping... or even fixing, offer this experience to God... asking God to use it to break you open to new life. And may all the Saints give you strength as they surround you on this journey.

In the name of Christ. Amen.