

November 5, 2017

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

All Saints' Sunday

The Rev. Tim Elliott

INTRO

Thanks to Jeff for the invitation. Jeff and Susan are very good neighbours and I'm so glad they're having a holiday with family and I could help out this morning.

Thanks to Vicar Jason for this very practical assistance this morning. Jason, what a great place to be formed in ordained ministry. You're very fortunate to have an internship here. And I love how you sing – that good Lutheran congregational singing.

It's a privilege to be here with you as an Anglican priest presiding at the Eucharist this morning in this vibrant Lutheran congregation at the table of the Lord. Think of this – all it took was a phone call for Pastor Jeff to invite me. No letters from Bishops – no doctrinal discussions. A phone call across the road! In a very tangible way we are doing something here to enact the prayer of Jesus: That they all may be one. There is far more that brings us together than separates us.

Let us pray:

A prayer written by an American pastor of German descent during the darkest days of World War II – Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr composed this prayer:

GOD GIVE US GRACE TO ACCEPT WITH SERENITY THE THINGS THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED,
COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS THAT OUGHT TO BE CHANGED, AND THE WISDOM TO
DISTINGUISH THE ONE FROM THE OTHER.

Early in my ordained ministry, I went to visit an older woman whose husband had died some years before. It was a nice little home. There I was in my brand new clergy shirt and collar and I didn't know where to start the conversation. But in that home were many many photographs - in fact I don't think there was a bare surface other than her little dining room table. And there were photos on the wall, and photos in the hall, and photos everywhere. Some coloured, many black and white. Some big, some small - photos of family groupings, old baby pictures, weddings, picnics, graduations, holidays, You get the picture?

So I asked her to tell me about the photos. For the next hour or so she took me on a tour of her life through these framed pictures. Most of these people had died, but they were alive to her. There in photos was life itself. She was content and comforted by those surrounding her. And these were ordinary people who had had an extraordinary effect on her. And each photo had a story to it.

The experience moved me then and still does. The hour flew by. For the next few days I remembered her energy. Later that week I was in our very old historic church and it was a day of brilliant sunshine. That particularly morning the sun streamed through the stained glass windows. And it was like they were alive.

At the bottom of each window there were names and dates of who had given the window. The window was in memory of someone. There was a story here. The family had chosen a story, image, or person for the window that inspired them. This story – this depiction gave them hope and comfort. And I thought of my encounter with the woman in her home. There was life here too. Just as she was surrounded by life and people who were alive to her, so in the church we were surrounded by images, stories, events, and hope.

Which is why I really like All Saints time. There's something about this time from All Hallow's Even to Remembrance Day when the dead are present with us. And for Christians this is a special time because we of all people are the ones for whom the veil between this world and the next world is thin. Often in life there are thin places. The ancient pagan Celts, and later, Christians, used the term THIN PLACES to describe mesmerizing places where Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter. And so like my parishioner and like me in that sun streaming church, there was a sense of energy – of life itself – and of being surrounded. It was a THIN PLACE.

I mention all this because my hope and purpose is that WE WILL THINK WITH GRATITUDE ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO SURROUND US IN THIS WORLD AND IN THE WORLD TO COME AND PRAY TO FOLLOW THEIR GOOD EXAMPLE.

From our opening hymn:
For all your saints, O Lord,
Who strove in you to live,
Who followed you, obeyed adored,
Our grateful hymn receive.

I think of how we in the church accept death as part of life – recognizing when it comes that yes it is an awful separation and grief and also there is a sense of continuing presence. We say in the creed that we believe in the communion of Saints. When someone dies we know that God has not died. I don't know about your Lutheran funeral words but in our Anglican tradition we have the phrase, 'in the midst of life, we are in death'. I remember those words coming to me when I was in college and a fellow student was killed in a car accident. And as Paul reminds us we live as sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

And so when we hear our readings this morning, we can hear them in the context of CHALLENGE AND LOSS AND DEATH. Another dimension opened up. And the question occurs to me – why do we hear the Beatitudes when we celebrate All Saints? A simple answer is because Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is pointing to what it is to be blessed.

So let's take a closer look.

Here are a things to notice:

1. Jesus 'sits' to teach. This is formal teaching in the ancient world. It continues in our reference to CHAIRS in university and in the CATHEDRAL tradition where the chair of the Bishop in Latin is the CATHEDRA.

2. The word 'blessed' also can be translated 'happy' – it is the word makarios in Greek. Another translation to 'blessed' is TRULY HONOURED.
3. Notice the tense – blessed ARE - not blessed WERE or blessed WILL BE – present tense – active – now – real – ARE.
4. Notice how the characteristic of blessedness is contrary to what most people think. It's a reversal – it's an upending – it's not what we expect. The theme here of seeing things from this perspective is what Mary was moved to sing about in the Magnificat.

Let's take a brief look at each one:

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

What is it to be poor in spirit? It is to know how little we actually have. I think of the feeding of the 5000 when a child showed up with their lunch and it was enough. I think of Jesus commending a word of thanks – a word of faith – it was enough.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN FOR THEY WILL BE COMFORTED. It is blessed to lose someone? Jesus says yes in the first case because it reminds us how precious life is and also because you will be comforted – from two words – COM= WITH and FORT = STRENGTH.

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK FOR THEY WILL INHERIT THE EARTH Meek is defined as quiet – gentle – humble. It refers to those who endure injury with patience and not resentment. Not having resentment – one of the ways to understand 'meek'.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR THEY WILL BE FILLED. What are we hungry and thirsty for?

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL FOR THEY WILL RECEIVE MERCY. You reap what you sow.

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD. Those who live an undivided life – salt of the earth – simple folks

BLESSED ARE THE PEACE-MAKERS. I remember hearing someone read this and emphasizing two words PEACE AND MAKERS - those who make peace.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. Finally, the reference changes from those others to YOU – BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN PEOPLE REVILE YOU AND PERSECUTE YOU AND UTTER ALL KINDS OF EVIL AGAINST YOU FALSELY ON MY ACCOUNT. REJOICE AND BE GLAD FOR YOUR REWARD IS GREAT IN HEAVEN, FOR IN THE SAME WAY THEY PERSECUTED THE PROPHETS WHO WERE BEFORE YOU.

What are the common themes? Poverty – mourning – emptiness – simplicity – making peace – persecution.

And in the time when the author of Matthew's gospel was writing his account of the story of Jesus, the followers of the way were under serious persecution. That is also echoed in the reading from Revelation chapter 7: who are the people in the great multitude? THESE ARE THEY WHO HAVE COME OUT OF THE GREAT ORDEAL.

The followers of Jesus – those early Christian communities that gathered around a Gospel, or were identified in the letters of Paul or John or Peter – went through a time of great persecution.

We know if we're honest that life is difficult. It's a challenge. There are tough times – there is sadness and pain. And to be blessed is to keep it simple and focus on God and love and being open to love. Because there is blessedness. God can fill our emptiness and satisfy our hunger and thirst.

And how does God do that? God surrounds us. God is a verb – God is love – God puts people in our path and in our circle to give us a word. And that is called GRACE – and you as Lutherans know about this. In this 500th year since the beginning of the REFORMATION, the favour of God can't be bought, only received as a free gift. Blessedness is a free gift when we allow God to fill us instead of all the other things.

It's like that extra hour this morning – that extra gift of time and space.

As John writes in his letter; SEE WHAT THE FATHER HAS GIVEN US THAT WE SHOULD BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD AND THAT IS WHAT WE ARE.

My hope and purpose is that WE WILL THINK WITH GRATITUDE ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO SURROUND US IN THIS WORLD AND IN THE WORLD TO COME AND PRAY TO FOLLOW THEIR GOOD EXAMPLE

So here's some suggested homework this week:

1. Every evening or the morning following, make a list in your daily reflection journal about the gifts of the day especially this time LIST WITH GRATITUDE THE PEOPLE WHO SURROUND YOU IN THIS WORLD AND IN THE WORLD TO COME AND PRAY TO FOLLOW THEIR GOOD EXAMPLE.
2. And/or you could take one the Beatitudes a day or one a week and look for signs of the blessedness of this perspective.

ENDING

In the Anglican hymnal, the last verse of THE CHURCH'S ONE FOUNDATION is this:

Yet we on earth have union with God the Three in One
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is one.
O happy ones and holy, Lord give us grace that we
Like them, the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with thee.