

The Vine at Home

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (All Saints) – Year A

Hymn:167 – Colours of day

Opening Prayers

Here we are Lord, present to meet with you.

This day I open myself up to your Spirit again – come amongst us, Lord Jesus.

This day I say I am sorry for all I have done wrong – forgive us, Lord Jesus.

This day I know that I am forgiven for all the times I have fallen short of your glory – thank you for accepting me as I am, Lord Jesus.

This day I worship the Living God – praise to you, Lord Jesus.

[Pause]

Here we are Lord, come amongst us, Lord Jesus. Amen.¹

We say together the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Revelation 7:9-17 The Multitude from Every Nation

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”²

1 John 3:1-3

¹ Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

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¹ See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he^[a] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.³

Matthew 5:1-12 The Beatitudes

5 When Jesus^[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. **2** Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.⁴

Reflections on the readings

"I think he said 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'"

"What's so special about the cheesemakers?"

"Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products."⁵

I adore Monty Python's Life of Brian. It's one of my very favourite films. It was released on 1979 when I was 13 years old. I was by no means a Christian at the time – so I didn't really see too much significance to all of the objections people voiced when it came out. I just loved it because it was Monty Python and I loved everything Python. It wasn't until much later in life when all the fuss started to mean much more to me.

By that time I could quote great swathes of the script on demand...

³ ⁴ Bible Text is from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved

⁵ Life of Brian: Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin
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The scene which those quotes come from is when the characters attended the Sermon on the Mount. They were a long way from the front where Jesus was speaking and they were struggling to hear everything he had to say.

Brian's mother kept interrupting to complain she couldn't hear and that she would have much preferred it if they had gone "to the stoning" to get their entertainment that day... and everyone else around them was getting irritated because her objections were not helping their ability to hear what Jesus had to say. Consequently, they started trying to understand why Jesus was suggesting that cheese manufacturers were somehow in line for special treatment from God...?

The thing I don't really understand about the objections to the movie is that the story of Jesus – and a Bible-faithful version of it at that – is running along in the background behind the main story of Brian getting mistaken for Jesus by so many of the people. We see glimpses of Jesus' life throughout the film, and I find that powerful from a Christian perspective. The thrust of the movie is that people missed the point and got confused... something which happens time and time again in the Gospel stories, and we can still find ourselves confused today. This wrestling is a way in which we can learn about the Gospel message today and its relevance to our lives, and it should be embraced.

I want to explore that today, by looking at the way in which the Beatitudes – Jesus' list of those who are blessed by the Gospel – was understood by those who heard it.

The three other Lectionary readings today have a common theme – they tell us a very comforting message of the way in which we can be blessed by God.

Revelation 7:9-17

The description of John's dream in Revelation describes a multitude all dressed in white and worshipping the Lamb of God in his vision of the heavenly realm, when somehow it will all be understood and resolved in the final analysis. Today this has significance because today is "All Saints Day" in the Christian calendar when we are to remember those special people across history who have achieved an "exceptional degree of holiness". Tomorrow is All Souls Day when we are meant to think about the rest... i.e. everyone else who has ever died and gone to glory.

I guess I find the distinction uncomfortable in general terms anyway and there are many schools of thought about John's vision as to exactly who the multitude in white are... is it just the saints, or is it everyone else...? Personally the description as a "multitude that no one could count" gives me a clue... but we're not going to resolve that today.

The point here is that John describes a blessed situation in this realm where we are at one with God, where we understand, where all our questions are answered and where God will "wipe away every tear from our eyes"... and it is that blessing which is in focus here today. We are blessed and truly loved by God.

1 John 3:1-3

John – the apostle of love gives us a parental image in terms of the blessings we are to receive from God if we follow him. We are to be "children of God". He describes the situation where we do not know what the future holds – a situation which can often be the source of such fear and anxiety – but underpins it with a baseline assurance of love and protection from our "parent" that can give us hope and encouragement for our future.

We are all truly blessed as these readings all describe. A "blessed assurance" indeed.

Then we have Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus delivers the sermon to beat all sermons – taking up a whole three chapters in Matthew’s gospel story – so Matthew clearly thought it was significant – and he starts by telling us who is blessed.

He hardly even need bother, eh? We know already. We know we’re blessed. We’ve nodded in all the right places, ticked all the right boxes, got our golden ticket, and so we know we are blessed in all the amazing ways that scripture has told us, so in some ways he’s wasting his breath. We know we’re alright and we don’t have to worry anymore.

Maybe – just like Brian’s Mum, we “should have gone to the stoning”?

And then he starts. Explaining all the groups of people who are blessed by God.

The meek? The mourning? The persecuted? The poor in spirit?

Oh dear.

And so the scene was set for Jesus teaching about the Kingdom, and its upside down nature. His teaching was challenging because it hit right at the heart of the people and made them question who they were, what they did, how they behaved, how they thought... and this wasn’t what they were expecting.

Whilst Brian was indeed “not the Messiah” – Jesus was.

As we read the Gospel stories, there is always a sense that the Messiah the people were expecting was a little bit like the Genie in Aladdin’s lamp – and he could simply make their wishes come true, whereas the truth was something altogether more uncomfortable and challenging. Jesus was offering an invitation which demanded a way of life that was humbling, a lifestyle of service rather than being served.

This was the truth. The truth of the Kingdom, which never made much sense when measured by earthly metrics.

The Kingdom rules that Jesus taught about were counter intuitive, and they were – and still are - sometimes tough to take:

- *“What? - those filthy tax collectors won’t get in before ME...?!?”*
- *“What do you mean I might be a GOAT??”*
- *“But if I’d worked all day in the field, then he shouldn’t get as much as me...!?”*

The Bible often reminds us we are blessed in the most beautiful of ways. We are “in”, we are loved, we are God’s children... and all of this is true.

But Jesus tells us what it looks like to be “in”. How we are to behave. The kind of heart we must have...

Our challenge as Christians in the midst of our society is to try – and keep on trying – to knit these two concepts together to the best of our abilities, and see where it takes us.

Jesus will always accompany us on the journey. This is our “blessed assurance”. Amen.⁶

⁶ Reflection written by Kevin Dobson

Prayers of intercession

On this All Saints Day, our prayers of intercession focus on the saints, which, as Kevin Dobson has reminded us – might just include all of us...

Glory to you, O Lord, from the whole company of heaven, from the saints in glory, from your people on earth.

Father, we give you thanks that in the darkness of this world your saints shine.

May we, with them, have a share in your everlasting kingdom; through Christ our Lord.

[Pause]

We give you praise for holy men and women who have been an inspiration to us, for those who have set us an example to follow.

May your church be inspired by their lives, seek to keep before it their dedication, and follow after their vision.

We pray for all who are seeking to fulfil their vocation, for all who seek to quietly dedicate themselves to you and your glory.

Lord of the saints, strengthen our faith.

Blessed are you, Lord our God. You have called us to a world full of good things.

We thank you for all who have set out to improve our world.

We pray for all who work in conservation, for those who care for others, for all who have sacrificed themselves in the service of others, for those who seek to live simply that others may simply live.

Lord of the saints, strengthen our faith.

We give you thanks for those who taught us the faith, for those who gave generously and sacrificially for us, for all who have led us in the ways of goodness and truth.

We pray that our homes and our work may be places of holiness, that we may be an example to others.

Lord of the saints, strengthen our faith.

We give thanks today for all your saints, and we join our praises with theirs.

Lord of the saints, strengthen our faith. Amen.⁷

Hymn: 673 STF Will you come and follow me?

Blessing

Go out and be blessed – be blessed by the Kingdom of God, which is inverting the way of the world, turning everything upside down.

Go and show love to a world of hate, in Jesus' name, Amen.⁸

⁷ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

⁸ Additional prayers by Tim Baker