



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

## Patronal Festival Eucharist

### On All Saints' Day

readings: [Revelation 7.9-end](#), [1 John 3.1-3](#), [Matthew 5.1-1](#)

5 November 2023

November is the month of remembrance. Today we combine our celebration of All Saints with the commemoration of All Souls tonight. If this morning is about the light of heaven, then this evening is about our mortality. Today is bound together by the love that does not let us go, the love that forgets not a single human life. This morning and this evening we encounter the light of Christ and its demands, and also face the reality of our own death.

And this weekend, as the Cathedral Church of All Saints we mark our patronal festival. This is the day when we give thanks for the life of this church established 1100 years ago by the Anglo-Saxons and which today is made visible by a pre-reformation Tudor tower, an early Georgian nave and a mid-twentieth century retrochoir and east end. As Derby Cathedral straddles two millennia, so it stands as a powerful symbol of the church's presence in this part of England.

It's our windows that speak eloquently of the themes of this weekend. Ceri Richards 1965 windows – All Souls and All Saints - speak of our humanity, the struggle within the human heart between the light and the dark, between the desire for Christ and the desire for what is less than God, the struggle that only finds resolution in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The heightened sense of battle in one window, the greater sense of peace in the other means that All Souls and All Saints must be held together. A pair of windows. One movement from the dark to the light. Progress from tension to resolution.

But it's the general absence of stained glass throughout Derby Cathedral, or rather the presence of clear glass, that's vitally important. Psalm 37: 'God will make your righteousness as clear as the light'. Psalm 119: 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path'.

The clear windows of the nave celebrate the clarity of light. They speak of the importance of vision and transparency. They speak of the place of reason in human experience, the evidence of our senses, our God-given ability to communicate with each other, the centrality we give to the scriptures in our worship. Our Cathedral Church celebrates all that was good about the Enlightenment period of European history.

So, this day links us to the ordinary experience of humanity, the cross of Christ and the environment in which we worship. What then of our Gospel reading from St Matthew, the first words of the Sermon on the Mount?

In the language of the New Testament all who follow Jesus are the saints, the holy ones of God. Note that Jesus was talking to ordinary human beings in the crowd that gathered around him. We miss something big when we think of the saints as the great heroes of the Christian faith. There is no hierarchy of achievement or status. All the saints are held equally by God.

The Beatitudes is the Manifesto for Saints; it's for all those who in ordinary everyday lives look out for the purpose of God in God's world.

Instead of 'blessed', we could say 'happy'. 'Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. But we could also translate the same word, 'congratulations'. 'Congratulations to those who mourn, for they will be comforted'. This sounds strange because in the first four beatitudes Jesus is describing the uncomfortable situation of human beings. To be poor, to mourn, to be meek, to be hungry and thirsty – these are hardly a matter of congratulations or happiness.

But each saying is linked with a promise – the promise of the kingdom of heaven, of comfort, of inheriting the earth, of being filled. In the unsatisfactory place of humanity in this world, God's grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus turns everything upside down. Jesus does not say how good it is to be poor, to mourn, to be meek, to be hungry - but he promises salvation now and, in the life, to come. He says that the kingdom of heaven is with and belongs to those who look to him and learn from him.

Think of the second four Beatitudes. If the first four are about what we are and our needs, then the second four are about what we do to promote the kingdom of heaven – being merciful, being pure in heart, being peacemakers and being righteous, even though we will be persecuted for it.

To discover what is important look at the words of Jesus and see what he repeats. First, he repeats the word 'righteousness'. This means imitating the actions of Jesus; it's acting ethically in God's world. We have a reminder of that in the clarity of our nave windows, that our actions as a church will be transparent to the world and need to be shaped by God's grace to contribute to the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Because the kingdom of heaven is the second thing that is repeated by Jesus. Our righteousness - our actions that are rightful, enabled by God's grace, that we might join in God's work in the world - contributes to the growth of the kingdom of heaven.

This is what the beatitudes are about. Living righteously through God's grace in the life of the kingdom of Heaven. The Beatitudes invite us to God's 'good life', the good life identified by who God is in Jesus, a life that begins now on this earth but finds its fulfilment in the life to come.

In our modern world it so happens that happiness is a much-valued idea. There is a link between happiness and our mental health and wellbeing. Many books are written on the idea of happiness.

But there is a puzzle to solve as we try to understand why it is when societies become wealthier the sum total of happiness does not increase. Since the 1950s as the West has become more affluent household incomes have doubled in real terms and yet we have rising levels of depression, alcoholism, crime, and violence in society. Interestingly, the most recent research has suggested that contentment rises when happiness is sought indirectly: focusing on being happy in itself does not work but focusing on other things can produce happiness as a by-product.

That's not a bad way into the teaching of Jesus as he sets the pathway for his disciples at the start of the Sermon on the Mount and especially for us in this troubled world.

As we observe what has happened and is happening in the Middle East, in Israel, and in Gaza, our hearts are broken – at the loss of innocent life, at the risk of escalation, at the seeming hopelessness of the political and religious situation. We do not know what to do, how to help, how to make a difference.

But that is where the 'Manifesto for Saints' comes in. In the face of the broken and the unsolvable we are to be poor in spirit as we acknowledge that humanity does not have the answers; we are to mourn as we openly acknowledge the brokenness of our world and the loss that continued violence brings to all humanity; we are to be truly meek in admitting humanity's weakness in the use of violence against others; we are to hunger and thirst for a society built not on hatred but on God's transforming love.

Jesus is saying that the way into the fullness of the kingdom of heaven is one step at a time. The promise is that step by step each one of us can make a difference. And this is the witness that we, this Cathedral church, have been given in God's providence. That each one of us can make a difference in the light of God's promises in the Beatitudes.

These past four weeks we have hosted Luke Jerram's Museum of the Moon and thousands have crossed the threshold. We have welcomed many who have not stepped foot in their Cathedral before.

Our purpose statement is to be a place that many are attracted to so that they may encounter God. We are to be a place of light and a place of beauty; a place of innovation and sanctuary. These four words – two from qualities of this remarkable building and two from the sort of community we set out to be – all speak eloquently of God to those who visit. The God of Jesus Christ who is the light of the world; the God

whose word to the world is full of beauty; the God who is deeply innovative and creative at every moment in human history; the God who is the God of sanctuary and offers safety and well being to us all.

Light, beauty, innovation, and sanctuary. It is our purpose to witness to the possibilities that being a saint of God can open up in the lives of each and every human being and to offer this as widely as we can across the diocese of Derby and to all who live within it, knowing that we with each person who lives in this diocese is called to be one of God's saints.

Through our glorious music, imaginative Christian education, strategic partnerships, involvement in arts and culture and through our innovative use of this remarkable building, we build on the 1100 years that have gone before us. May we grasp the significance of our designation as All Saints and may we, step by step, participate in God's vision for all humanity.

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson**

**Dean of Derby**