

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

All Saints: on seeing what we shall be

All Saints Day is an occasion when following this service we provide an opportunity to have time together over some food, that our fellowship here in Christ may grow deeper and stronger. This simple action grows from the core idea that lies at the heart of this day - a thought which helps to make us the church we are. All Saints is for remembering our connection with a great company of God's people from every age and generation, in which we are included as sisters and brothers. This community includes martyrs who, from as early as the second century Christians commemorated as significant, remembering the date of their death as the date of their "birth into eternal life." The Reformation emphasis on the priesthood of all believers caused a shift away from the saints past to the present community of the church as saints. But the real meaning of All Saints is best kept if we hold both of these together. The wonderful vision of community life at the heart of the readings is a resource that can move us beyond our individualism, parochialism and tribal loyalties to own our place in a community, the boundaries of which reach far beyond anything we can explain. This vision has the power to reshape our identity, and teach us who we are, and what we are about.

The reading from Revelation (7:9-17) is a vision from beyond time. It is more like an imaginative hymn in praise of God, whose saving actions have brought together a company of blessed and happy people from every race, tribe, culture and nation. This vision is celebrated by the Psalmist who said (Ps 34:22) "The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned". In the vivid scene in Revelation a huge crowd dressed in white and carrying palm branches is gathered before God's throne where they enjoy the consolation of God's presence and the shelter and wholeness that brings. These are people who have passed through the great ordeal: they have suffered in order to stay true to Christ. Not for them the words of Peter as he cursed and swore outside the gate: "I do not know the man!" (Matt 27:74). They remained loyal. But there is no trace of pride over the wounds it brought them, and there is no sign of competition over who has suffered the most. For the consolation they enjoy did not come through the loss of their own blood. The blessing of seeing God face to face is the fruit of another's suffering: it is the blood of the Lamb has whitened their robes and brought them to God. Their place in the communion of saints is a gift of his life of love poured out. That is why they are single-mindedly focussed on praising God.

The God at the centre of this vision is, in Old Testament terms, the God who made a home in Zion. But if actions speak louder than words, and if this vision is to be taken seriously as something we live towards, it provides no basis for a religiously sectarian or racially exclusive approach to life. Here is a wondrously diverse community busy

ministering to God. It sings from the same song sheet, free of all forms of chaos and dissonance. It seems hard to believe, and yet it is a vision of reconciliation that speaks to the deepest desire of our hearts, for ourselves, and for the world we live in.

The vivid picture in Revelation may seem out of reach, but John, in his letter, makes it clear this vision touches us here and now. He speaks of the world as a place that, by its own blindness is alienated from God. It is populated by those who try to make themselves into God and do not see God's people for who they are. But, as Martin Luther says: God 'is found by those who do not put him to the test and manifests himself to those who do not distrust him'. (Wisdom 1:2, Shorter Catechism.) Within a hostile world there is a community that is receptive to the transforming power of God's love. The followers of Christ have allowed themselves to receive God's love and let it shape and change their lives. These are the children of God and this, John tells us, is what we now are. Not children by our own efforts, but children by the creative decision and gift of God. It is for this reason we boldly pray: "Our Father..."

The church collected the stories of the children of God, the saints, and retold them, so that others would refuse to allow their intentions to be contaminated or their hearts seduced. Because of their loyal witness, even in death, redeeming love did not stay sealed up in the community of faith, but went forth to extend God's victory over the evil powers that compete for the possession of the world. In this way the grace of Christ was extended and allowed to reproduce something in the world.

Great are the steps in which we follow, but as children of God now, John says, we face an even greater transformation in the future. One day we will be like God. Clement of Alexandria said the goal of our life is coming home to God – a state of being where there is no gap between knowing ourselves, knowing each other and knowing God. In the communion of saints - a city of God beyond our history, and our imagining, the limits of our language and our bodies will no longer be mechanisms to imprison us and isolate us from each other. That means that our relationship with one another and with God does not end with death. Paul says: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, ... God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). We cannot spell out in detail what that means. What we can say is that in the future those who trust themselves to God will enjoy to the full God's creative mercy and freedom.

Who are the people who have encouraged you and been mentors for you on your journey? Who are the figures from history whose thought and witness has inspired your life and faith? These and many more whom we have never known are gathered around to support us as we make our journey towards God. Today we make the bold claim that the people from the past, and those whose names we have brought with us, are our relatives in the suffering of Christ. His life of self-giving has touched and us brought us together. His is the everlasting light that shines on in the world, which the darkness cannot overcome. We give thanks for the hope and faith in which it allows us to live. Amen.