

Sermon

Sunday 1 November 2020
All Saints' Day

Lesson St Matthew 5: 1 – 12

Jesus saw the crowds, went up the mountain, sat down and began to teach His disciples. Mountains are places of peace, constancy, eternity and stillness. 'Thin places', they are holy ground; sacred spaces for encounter the Numinous, the God within. Like Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, Jesus sought the solitude of the mountain: a seat of meditation.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached the proverb-like sayings which we know as *The Beatitudes*. In Latin, each saying or blessing begins with *beatus*, meaning blessed or happy: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. In Hebrew, the opening word of each saying is *esher*, which gives us the boy's name Asher. There is a dozen or so beatitudes in the Tanakh, the Old Testament; in Deuteronomy, Isaiah, the Book of Psalms, Proverbs and Job. In the time of Jesus, in the Greek and Roman worlds, it was the gods who were truly blessed, not the crowds; not the people of the villages, towns or cities.

A mystic and teacher within the Jewish tradition, soaked in the wisdom of His people's holy Scriptures, Jesus drew from the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 61). The poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who shall inherit the earth, those who thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, and those who will rejoice and be glad all have their parallels in the preaching of the prophet Isaiah. For me, the thrust of Jesus' sermon was to focus the attention of His listeners on God; to make God, the Divine, the core reality of their lives. It is not different for us: the Beatitudes are an inclination of mind, a predisposition of the heart, in order that we may see God permeating the whole of our lives. The spiritual journey is a susceptibility of the soul; an openness to the Presence, the Mystery.

I love this sanctuary with the striking beauty of its windows, the stories they tell, the stillness in worship of this sacred space and, with imaginative sensitivity, the gracious atmosphere of prayer; we can inhale the fragrance of intimate prayers uttered in word and silently by worshippers down the generations. Today is All Saints' Day, a moment in the calendar of the Church in which we explicitly call to mind our mystical oneness with Christians, followers of Jesus, who are alive today, either on earth or in life beyond this life which is hidden from our view. In this sanctuary, even if

we sit alone, we are never alone: the Communion of Saints fills the air. In the mind's eye, we may step back two thousand years to see and hear Jesus for ourselves, seated on the mountain alongside the crowd that journeyed to hear Him.

In the Christian tradition, properly understood, saints are not plaster casts; brilliantly white, morally good or of exceptional holiness. The monk, Thomas Merton, said the Christian task is *being for* Jesus, while 'accepting ourselves as we are in our condition, infidelity, disruption, ferment and even desperation'. We encounter God, the Living Christ, along the pathway of our own story, in all its wonder, brokenness, and beauty. Let me briefly tell you about three saints.

Jean Donovan was born in 1953 and died in 1980. A member of an affluent American family and graduate accountant, she went to work as a lay missionary in El Salvador. Jean sorted the accounts, distributed food, led Bible studies and each day buried those murdered by the Revolutionary Junta. In the first five months of 1980, over 2000 Salvadoreans were killed. Priests who lived alongside peasants teaching basic literacy and

caring for people became targets of death squads. Jean worked in parishes which had no priest. In a letter to a friend, she said:

Several times I have decided to leave El Salvador.
I almost could except for the children, the poor, bruised
victims of this insanity. Who would care for them?

Two weeks later, Jean and three nuns were ambushed and murdered. Jean was an ordinary person, performing in most instances mundane tasks, who was living out her faith in a dangerous country. Her commitment to the suffering of others is a continuing inspiration for followers of Jesus today.

John Hyde, or 'Praying Hyde', was born in 1865 and died in 1912. He was a missionary in India. He said he felt that he wanted 'to give something to Jesus Christ who loved me'. Hyde's main work was not as a teacher or an evangelist but as an intercessor: he prayed for others. One woman said, 'I do not remember that he ever talked about prayer: *he prayed*'. One man said that, in prayer, John's eyes would often fill with tears: his heart was deeply moved by his concern and love for others. There was an intimacy and immediacy with Jesus in John's silent praying.

If Jean Donovan's saintliness is found in her sacrificial love for the poor, for those suffering, then John Hyde's saintliness is found in his sacrificial

prayer. Praying, particularly silent prayer, can be a difficult task. To pray daily, at home, on the street, in the park or on the beach, may demand a true measure of self-discipline; a spiritual openness. Few of us are called to the life of prayer led by monks or John Hyde, but he remains an inspiration to followers of Jesus today.

The third person I shall not name. She was a member of my first congregation. She was in her sixties and died in 1998 from cancer. She had grown up in the church; it was her second home. Before retirement, she had worked in an office doing general duties. She sang in the choir each week and enthusiastically did her share of Elder's duties. In facing the cancer, she hoped for a miracle, a divine intervention, a cure that the doctors could not provide. It was not to be. Her faith in God, in Jesus, in her final months, weeks and days was an inspiration to her family, and me. In the face of her own death, she insisted we sing the twenty third psalm at her funeral:

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
yet will I fear none ill:
for thou art with me; and thy rod
and staff me comfort still.

She insisted we sing the hymn of Edward Perronet:

All hail the power of Jesus' Name!
Let angels prostrate fall;
bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown him Lord of all.

That is immense, life-shaping, life-changing faith to inspire us. Seeing and feeling faith at first hand can touch lives beyond measure. It did mine.

In worship in our sanctuary, we face the empty cross of Resurrection, of new life; we face the Table – the symbol of Christ's Presence in our midst, our host, with the Bible at our side and Bible stories depicted in windows all around; and, in faith, we are surrounded by the Communion of Saints.

Amen.