

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

All Saints' Day

1 November 2020

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

'God's Kingdom'

Let's Build a Wall

I am sure that many of you are familiar with the old joke about the wall in heaven with the bulk of Christians on one side of it, and a rump of that particular group of bigots and charlatans that you don't like being on the other because they believe that they are the only ones there.

Sadly, exclusivism has been a feature of Christianity from its earliest times. It is not only a matter of disagreement between parties but sometimes an active desire to exclude from God's presence those that we don't like or with whom there is conflict. Such polarisation has led to religious wars and persecutions that have, not only betrayed the gospel of love, but brought about wanton destruction of people, property, and the environment. The seventeenth century European Wars of Religion come to mind - the most destructive in modern European history, and of course there is the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, and the Irish 'troubles', to name but a few.

To ensure that our group is untainted (be it a particular religious persuasion, a political party, an ethnic group, or a race), we build a metaphorical wall around ourselves against the 'others'. Indeed, sometimes it is a real wall, or even a moat; examples being South Africa under apartheid, or the Iron Curtain, or the wall in East Jerusalem, or Trump's America, or our own anti-refugee 'Stop the Boats!'.

The twentieth century American poet, Robert Frost, wrote an especially nuanced piece titled 'Mending Wall'. It describes two New England farmers repairing a wall between their properties. The narrator questions the need for the wall as neither run livestock and he mused on the situation:

*There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'*

He then wants to ask why the wall ‘makes for good neighbours’, in other words ‘what is it about an unnecessary wall that makes someone good?’ but the question is never put. Instead, they go on doing what they have always done, and the wall remains between them – cold, dark, and unloving.

Who are these Robed in White?

Of course, there is no dividing-wall in heaven. The image of heaven described in the Book of Revelation is of God’s heavenly court. There are no harps, no clouds, no angels’ wings. Instead, there is a great multitude of people ‘from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’ – these are the saints. This vision of heaven depicts a place where there are no distinctions between peoples, no walls, no ‘in’ group and no ‘out’ group, for all are one; and their task is to worship God.

The word translated for ‘saint’ in the Scriptures is ἅγιος (hagios), which means those (things or people) that are set apart or devoted to God. It was only in the medieval period that the word became a title for those who were recognised by the church as ‘especially holy’ - or more set apart than others.

The term ‘saint’ is principally used by the Apostle Paul when addressing recipients of his letters and when referring to groups of Christians that gather in particular places. In the book of Revelation, however, the word ‘saint’ implies the faithful people of God present in heaven, having survived persecution and hardship. It is a mystical image of where God’s people are meant to end up and is a sign of hope for the future.

As we gather on this All Saints’ Day, we focus on this image of the faithful who have gone to God in heaven – the multitude depicted as worshipping God. This is not only an image of the future but is also a reminder of what we are meant to be now as we live in God’s Kingdom.

Part of the mystery of the human journey is the capacity to contemplate what has been, what is now, and what is to happen all at the one time. It is this consciousness of ourselves as a person moving through time and space that can give us a God-like perspective on life. So, as we remember the saints who have been, we also think about our present saintliness, that will go on to inform and encourage a generation of saints to come after us. In this way we can be joined to God’s people down through history, across the world today, and finally on into the fullness of time.

The Revelation image of the saints reminds us that we are called to be a worshipping community; a group of people set apart to praise God as we do this morning. It also means that our worship today is meant to reflect the heavenly kingdom - a place where all can gather equally before God from all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages. It is a gathering without walls.

Becoming What we are Meant to Be

The reading from the First Letter of John suggests another outcome from the consciousness of being part of God's world, and that is we may understand ourselves as children of God. This is another metaphor for entering into a relationship with God through a process of transformation, sometimes called conversion, and symbolised in Baptism.

As a priest, one of the great privileges of being a celebrant of life's rituals from birth to death (including those meaningful moments in between), is having the opportunity to affirm the relational aspects of being human at the various stages of the journey. We are herd animals, and the experiences of lockdown during the current pandemic have reminded us that we need each other.

We are born into a set of relationships that tell us who we are. As we engage with more people, and adapt to our circumstances, we learn new things about ourselves and the mystery of life. Of course, as a child we tend to live in a monochromatic world of personal needs and rules, leading to a hard-edged consciousness of 'rightness' and 'wrongness'. But this changes over time as the less defined aspects of humanity, such as our relationships, play a more significant part. This reflects part of our spiritual growth toward becoming the people that God wants us to be – from selfishness to saintliness.

In this way, we come to understand that life is not so much about being something as becoming something – a transformative process that helps us to transcend the human boundaries of race, creed, class, and gender. We build walls so that we may feel safe, protected and in control; but in the Kingdom of God there are no walls.

The Kingdom of God, in this instance, is not a place we go to when we die but rather a social dynamic based on God's authority over our lives in the here and now. In this way the Kingdom is the manifestation of God's intention for humanity; a return to paradise (or the garden of Eden if you like), where humans were meant to live in peace and harmony with one another, nature, and God.

May the Blessed One Give a Blessing

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus provided a reinterpretation of the Torah (or Old Testament Law) in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus drew his listeners away from a literal (or Black Letter) interpretation of the Law toward one that was focussed on its spirit or intention. To do this, he challenged the motivations of those around him by presenting the Law as something that is impossible to keep. It needs to be understood that he did not create a new set of rules and regulations but rather provided a means of interpretation – a hermeneutic.

The section of the Sermon read today is known as the Beatitudes. These sayings 'blessed are the poor in spirit... and so on' may be contrasted with the Ten Commandments. The Beatitudes are positive statements about being blessed, whereas the Ten Commandments are principally expressed in negative 'Thou shalt not' terms. In this way Jesus painted a picture of what God's world is like, a place where blessings are given to 'the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek...' and so on and so forth.

Worldly people bless the rich and powerful, but it is not so with God - which may explain his unpopularity in the western world today. The Kingdom of God is about justice, fairness, peace, goodness - not so much in the next world as in the world of here and now. And you can see the presence of the Kingdom when you see people living as God intended – indeed, where love rules 'doing to others as you would have them do to you'.

So, the Feast of All Saints' helps us to transcend time and space by reminding us of the great multitude of God's faithful people down through the ages and across the world. Moreover, the image of the heavenly court presents that multitude as worshipping God - without boundaries, without exclusion, without bigotry.

As Robert Frost wrote:

*Why do walls make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down....*