

All Saints – Sunday 30th October

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18

Ephesians 1:11-end

Luke 6:20-31

When we were thinking about Luke a few weeks ago Kate mentioned that in writing his gospel he was aiming to give an orderly account of the life of Jesus as relayed to him by eyewitnesses – he himself was not an eyewitness of the events of course. In church we often read just short sections of the gospel – as we have today - and because the gospel is an orderly account it is important to know the context of the passage if we are to understand it properly. To know about what comes before it and what comes after it and how that context affects the meaning of the passage.

Just before today's reading – which was of course the Luke version of the famous beatitudes which appear in Matthew's sermon on the mount – were these words:

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

These words are not the first time in Luke that we hear of the disciples – we have already had stories of Jesus calling people to follow him – Peter, James, John and Levi are all named just a chapter or so before this. So we can imagine a growing group of followers. But here he chooses 12 of them. All four of the gospels agree that 12 are chosen, though the different accounts do not fully agree on their names, and for some of the disciples their listing in the list of names is the only time they are mentioned in the gospels. It's as if the number of them – 12 - was more important than their actual names. Why, we might wonder? What's so important about 12?

In the OT we read the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For each of them – as for many other biblical characters – their names actually meant something. And – you will perhaps recall – Jacob was given the new name of *Israel* by God after he had spent the night in a struggle with God. And after that the name *Israel* began to refer

to the whole nation – in other words to all the descendants of Jacob. And we also know that in the nation there were 12 tribes – corresponding to the 12 sons of Jacob or Israel. And these 12 tribes in many ways defined the nation.

So when Jesus chose 12 people to be apostles, these specially chosen disciples – it would have been seen to have similar great significance. Here Jesus was redefining what Israel – the chosen people of God – were. In and through Jesus God was doing a new thing and – just like the ‘old thing’ began with 12 tribes, 12 sons of Jacob or Israel so this new thing began with 12 – these 12 chosen apostles. This was the beginning of God’s new covenant people. This was the beginning of what Jesus called The Kingdom of God.

So much for background – but what about today’s gospel reading and how does that relate to All Saints Day?

It seems to me that having just introduced the idea of this new thing that God was doing, in today’s gospel reading Jesus goes on to explain what that new thing would be like.

In the OT there are a host of rules and instructions for the nation of Israel (laws like the 10 commandments and other instruction for living – much of the book of Deuteronomy for example contains such instructions) and there were promises of blessings for those who obeyed them and curses for those who didn’t. And here we see Jesus setting down 4 promises and 4 warnings for the new kingdom – in effect setting a code for life in the new kingdom. Giving an invitation to his followers to be part of the kingdom.

Blessed are the poor, those who are hungry, those who weep and those who are hated.

Woe to the rich, those who are full, those who are laughing and those who are well regarded.

This is of course a complete reversal of the way the world looks at things – not just in today’s culture but also as it was in the time of Jesus. The values of the world say that fulfilment comes through wealth, satisfaction, happiness and popularity. Jesus says this is a myth or an illusion. And I guess when we think about we can see that what he says is right – ask a rich person what they think they need to be content or fulfilled and the chances are they would say ‘just a little more’. Contentment or fulfilment are always just out of reach when we try to attain them in our own strength and by our own efforts. But that doesn’t stop people chasing that illusion!

But is Jesus really saying that it is better to be poor and hungry and wanting? I don't think that can possibly be the case. He is surely talking about our attitude to things. A year or so back some of us were studying the Beatitudes (albeit the version from Matthew) and a phrase that stood out to me at the time was this - *Blessed are those who know their need of God*. It's a paraphrase of what the beatitudes are about.

When Jesus says in today's gospel reading that the poor and hungry and grieving and hated are blessed, he is surely saying that only those who are aware of what they need, and acknowledge that they themselves cannot provide it, are ready to accept God. In other words *Blessed are those who know their own need*.

So Jesus is saying that life in the new kingdom is marked out by our being aware of our need of God. Fullness of life (the phrase he uses elsewhere) can only be obtained when we recognise our need of God. We cannot live fulfilled or blessed lives without God.

Today as we have said is All Saints Day

We often think of saints as being people like those 12 apostles. Peter, James, John and the others – or super special Christians through the ages like Francis, Paul, Stephen etc. But in the bible whenever the word saint is used it means all Christians

As in the letter to the Ephesians this morning - *I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints*

Here Paul uses saints to refer to other Christians, other believers. All Saints day then can be a time when we recognise we are not alone. We are travelling on the Christian journey with many others. Others here in St James, in our Parish, across Shirley and Birmingham and the UK and the world. In our time and in some mystical way with Christians through the ages.

There's that wonderful passage in the letter to the Hebrews that we often read on All Saints Day where the writer talks of all the saints, all the faithful people of old, and ends by saying that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses – a moving picture of those saints of old urging us on our journeys of faith.

So how can we support each other? By talking, encouraging, listening and praying. By sharing our experiences of God in our lives (like the wow moments). By reading and discussing scripture together. And there are two groups starting in the next couple of weeks to help us do this – Wednesday evenings once a month at our

house, and Wednesday afternoons each week in Church House. Have a word with me if you would like to know more.

As Christians we are all different, all unique, all made to be our individual selves but somehow each made in the image of God. But the common thing amongst us is that we are aware of our need of God. We recognise that we cannot do it all by ourselves, we can only be truly content in life, have this fulness of life that Jesus talks about, when we trust in God. When we walk with him day by day in the company of the saints.