

## Sermon – All Saints’ Day – 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020

Sometimes we all need our lives shaken up just a little bit. I remember one significant time that it happened to me. In many ways I was a confident teenager. Although I wasn’t especially popular, I was a good student, and I knew what I wanted to do. I worked hard, and university and career were on the cards. And then I hit a dilemma. I was offered deferred entry to my preferred university. Which meant a gap year. Which just wasn’t in the life plan. And then, when I got to university, I was unhappy. I changed course, which helped a little. But, by the time I graduated, all my certainty was eroded. For what felt like the first time in my life, I had no idea what to do next.

It was a formative time for me. And of course there have been others. What I would never say is that I would have chosen those times. Or indeed that they were without pain. But they form part of the story of who I am.

Jesus was all about stirring things up. And he had good reason. He believed that people were focusing on the wrong things. And he knew that if they focused on the right things it would utterly transform their lives. That’s quite a responsibility to bear – and indeed quite a claim to make.

Before we think about the Beatitudes – that wonderful section of St. Matthew’s gospel that forms our reading this morning – we need to remember how people understood the world. If you read the Old Testament, one thing becomes very clear. That people had a strong sense that those people who were wealthy and powerful had been blessed by God. In a way it makes perfect sense. After all, if you prayed to God for a good harvest, and it came to pass, it is hardly surprising that those who reaped the benefits of a good harvest believed that God had blessed them.

So, it is into the context of an assumption that those who were blessed were those who were successful in the world’s terms – rich, powerful, influential – that Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount, which opens with the Beatitudes.

Just think for a moment about how much he is turning the world upside down. As he lists those on whom God’s blessing rests, he doesn’t identify the leaders, the landowners or those of high status. But rather the poor in spirit; those who mourn; the meek; those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. And in doing so there can be little doubt that he shook people up.

This year, we know what it’s like to have our lives shaken up. Whatever our personal circumstances, we have all had our freedoms curtailed. Our choices have been restricted. Our horizons have been foreshortened.

For some, the turmoil has been far greater. Those who have been bereaved this year have experienced the almost impossible anguish of being unable to see loved ones in their final hours. And that’s before they have been restricted to minimal mourners at the funeral.

Those who work in hospitals will no doubt have their own stories to tell about the way their lives have been impacted by a global pandemic and a significantly increased death rate. Children were unable to go to school for almost half the year. For many the daily commute now consists of the walk from the kitchen to whichever room has become a makeshift office.

And many, many people have found themselves unemployed.

When I was teaching, a great deal of time and energy was put into encouraging the children to work hard in order to achieve their hopes, dreams and ambitions. Young people were being brought up with the mindset that their future lay in their own hands. That if they worked hard, they would get good results. And if they achieved good results, they would be able to secure work.

One of the most unsettling things about the impact of this year's pandemic is the realisation that those who have suffered have done nothing wrong. There were individuals working in perfectly reputable sectors, whose business plans undoubtedly stacked up. Yet now they have no work. An example I have been following is St. Martin in the Fields, the church in Trafalgar Square in London, where numerous redundancies have had to be made because revenue has declined so dramatically and the demand for hospitality has significantly reduced. The work of St. Martin's has always been exemplary. No one has done anything wrong. Yet individuals are experiencing the pain of redundancy.

For many people, this is definitely a year of the world being turned upside down.

So I wonder, on this All Saints Day, what do the words of Jesus have to teach us? What might we discover that might bring us closer to God?

It's easy to believe, because the words of the Beatitudes are so familiar to us, that somehow we are different from those who believed that God's blessing was demonstrated by worldly wealth. The thing is, though, we're not really all that different at all. It's hard for us to see success where so much of the world would see failure.

What stands out in the Beatitudes is that Jesus identifies qualities and values that endure regardless of our personal circumstances. It's not that he is wishing redundancy on any of us, but rather that he is pointing to what really matters. To where we need to place our faith and trust so that we don't get lulled into a false sense of security by material wealth and success.

On All Saints Day, we take time to think of those who exemplify for us the path of faith. If we examine the lives of saints – those from history, or those who have touched our own lives – how often do we find stories of endurance; of challenge and struggle; of perseverance against the odds? Jesus knew a thing or two when he identified where God's blessing rests.

And, for our own part, today is an opportunity to place ourselves within that communion of saints. To be inspired by the stories of their lives. To recognise that in our prayer and worship, we are surrounded by that cloud of witnesses that is the saints who have gone before us as well as our own fellow travellers. And to commit ourselves once more to those qualities and values identified by Jesus in the beatitudes.

Amen