

Sermon

Sunday 1st November, 2009

Lessons

Revelation 7: 9 – 17

St Matthew 5: 1 – 12

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Aid us, O Lord, when we think upon Your Holy Word. From every error to which we cling, and every falsehood that deceives our heart, be pleased to deliver us; and by the truth You have given, make us wise unto salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.....

Rev 7: 9

From the year 835AD, the Church has been celebrating the Feast of All Saints on 1st November. In the four hundred years before that, feasts of All Saints were celebrated in different parts of Christendom at different times, typically Easter Week and Pentecost, but for the last twelve hundred years, the Church has celebrated the Feast of All Saints on 1st November. This is the day when martyrs and non-martyrs, most of whom are not remembered in this world, are honoured by the Church for their witness to the Lord. I find it an immense comfort to remind myself of and to bring into my consciousness the communion of saints. The Church, with a capital 'C', the Church catholic, the Church universal, is not any single denomination; it is not dependent on the continued existence of any single denomination. The Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church are not, not even together, the Church catholic. Denominations are worldly structures: there is a spiritual reality behind them. They seek to honour and

witness to that spiritual reality but they are not that reality. When we baptise an infant or an adult we declare that individual to be a member of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and to be a disciple and servant of Jesus Christ. The denomination is not mentioned. The Church is a spiritual reality. The great preacher, James S Stewart, said:

It is a desolating thing to go through a church service in which no vivid sense of the transcendent is apparent, no opening of the windows towards an unseen reality, no gleam of supernatural light streaming through from the eternal world.¹

In the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, the author describes a vision, an imaginative insight, of the spiritual nature of the Church: ‘After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb....’ I find it an immense comfort to know and feel that we never stand alone; there is that sense that we follow in the footsteps of a great line of people right back to the days when Jesus walked the streets of Capernaum and the road to Jerusalem.

I think that it is very important in life for children and adults to have role models; people that we can look up to. We can never be those people but their life and wisdom and witness can inspire us, lift our eyes from always looking downwards and raise them up to the treetops and the stars. It is people who

¹ James S Stewart *King for ever* p11

inspire us that enable us to achieve things we never believed possible of ourselves. It is role models who shape us and, to a very deep extent, colour and enrich our lives. During the marriage service which I conduct, I often say to young couple that, if they are so blessed, they will have a unique opportunity as parents to model a loving, caring and forgiving relationship and what a gift that is to bestow to their children. Role models, often by osmosis, by a seeping into the pores of our souls, raise the stature of our broken humanity. If such is true of family life, of the work place, of politics and secular society in general, it is no less true of the Church.

In the Church, role models are called saints. We should rebuke ourselves if we ever catch ourselves thinking that the witness and insights of the saints are of little value to us because they lived in a former era and are now dead. They are not dead. Their witness, their writings, their insights are treasures of the Church, passed along the line, for the spiritual health and enrichment of those who follow, you and me. There is so much confidence to be gained from knowing that we do not stand alone; we stand side by side with giants.

In the twelfth century, Aelred, the Abbot of Rievaulx in Yorkshire, wrote *The Life of St Ninian*. Aelred wrote the biography, if I may use that word, some eight hundred years after Ninian died. It is based on earlier documents. Let

me read two short extracts in order for us get a flavour of the life of Ninian. Of his youth, the biography reads:

He was sparing in food, reticent in speech, assiduous in study, agreeable in manners, averse in jesting; and in everything he subjected the flesh to the spirit. And so bending his mind to the sacred Scriptures, after he had studied the rules of the faith from the more learned of his race, the young man came to see by his own deep insight and from the inspiration gleaned from the Scriptures, that much was wanting to their perfection. On this his mind began to be concerned, and not enduring anything short of perfection, he toiled and sighed. His heart was hot within him, and at last in meditation the fire kindled.

Then, of Ninian's death, Aelred wrote:

Christ, consoling the hesitant soul said: 'Arise, hasten, my friend, my dove, and come. Arise, my friend, arise, my dove, arise through the mind, hasten by desire, come by love.'

.....

The blessed Ninian, perfect in life and full of years, passed from this world in happiness and was carried into heaven, accompanied by the angelic spirits, to receive an eternal reward, where, in the company of the apostles, martyrs, holy confessors and virgins, he fails not to succour those who hope in him, who cry to him, who praise him.

I know that much of that writing is the language of the period and the language of religious imagination, but did you hear through that poetic prose the affection in which Ninian was evidently held? There are stories of miracles and healing attached to the saint's name and we have to read those with care but besides the affection for the man who had brought Christianity to what is now southern Scotland there is an unshakeable belief that the saint lives, that the day of his death was his day of Resurrection, that on the day the people mourned the

passing of their spiritual father, the saint rejoiced in heaven. Ninian had become one of the many who stood around the throne praising God. It is all couched in the language of myth and metaphor but remember what Thomas Mann said: ‘Myth is about the way things never were, but always are.’ The fire that kindled within the hearts and souls of Ninian and Columba has shaped the history of this land for over fifteen hundred years. We walk on the soil on which they walked and in the Church, the Church catholic, we stand with them, side by side; they are alive and speak to us still. If we dare, we can let them inspire us.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of the attributes of the saint: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart and blessed are the peacemakers. These are the attributes or qualities of the saint. Saints are never portrayed as perfect people but as faithful people, people who nurtured, lived and died their faith. Again to quote James S Stewart:

The fact is, it is this transcendent thing, this stretching of the horizons to unseen realities, this immersion in the Spirit – it is this alone which can make us a Church, and not just a benevolent club or one more redundant society.²

This is an important day, a vital feast, for the Church’s self-understanding. St Paul told the Church at Philippi, ‘You are a colony of heaven’ here on earth to

² Ibid. p11

work God's redemptive purpose. And, in Paul's day, the Church in Philippi was probably no larger in number than this congregation. A month or so ago, I mentioned Keith Ward who said, 'Perhaps materialism is the greater delusion.' Do we grasp that? I do not believe the saints in heaven are present in any metaphysical sense, but present to us as voices in our heads, speaking to us through words they wrote years ago, through the stories others told of them, their spirit speaking intimately to ours. 'You are a colony of heaven,' said St Paul. 'It is this transcendent thing...this immersion in the [Holy] Spirit...this alone makes us the Church.' We are baptised into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. And, 'perhaps materialism is the greater delusion.' The other day I listened to a man who has advised four US Presidents. He said that whenever he is asked to speak about leadership he tells his audiences about the need for role models. The society we live in, secular society is not neutral towards faith; it is at best agnostic and at worst atheistic. We need role models; we need to listen to the saints. Our souls need to be stained by their example. And the very fact that we listen to their voices, speaking soul to soul, will remind us that we are in this world but not of this world. We are created for eternity.

Amen.