The Feast of All Saints

This Sunday marks the celebration of the Feast of All Saints, which, in Anglo-Saxon days, was called All Hallows. By way of a piece of trivia, the eve of All Hallows was Halloween. The Celts of Britain celebrated the Druid festival of *Samhain* on November 1, which marked the beginning of winter and the Celtic New Year. It was believed that a gathering of supernatural forces occurred at this time greater than any other time of the year. On the eve and day of *Samhain* the barriers between the human and supernatural worlds were broken. Otherworldly entities, such as the spirits of the dead, were able to visit earthly inhabitants, and humans could take the opportunity to penetrate the domains of the gods and supernatural creatures.

It is believed (though not certain) that to get people away from these superstitious practices the festival was Christianised with the feast of All Saints, which was established in Europe as a commemoration of all martyrs. In today's liturgy the Solemnity of All Saints honours all the faithful departed who are one with God in heavenly glory.

John's main aim was to provide a source of encouragement for his fellow Christians

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 The first of today's readings is an extract from the book of Revelation or Apocalypse. The Greek word *apokálypsis* means a disclosure, uncovering, revelation. So, an apocalypse is a revelation, and usually a revelation through dreams, visions or trance of some kind. Most people today understand apocalypse as a universal disaster or nuclear destruction, but the word originally refers to the revelation of a future event, mostly to deal with the triumph of good over evil. Today's reading from the 7th chapter describes the writer's vision of all the saints, that is, those who had died and were standing before the heavenly throne of God. Pride of place goes to the martyrs who had shed their blood for Christ and then comes the uncountable multitude of the people of God in heaven.

The book of Revelation was written during the last decade of the 1st century by a writer known only as John of Patmos, a Christian elder, most probably not the author of the Gospel of John. He recorded the visions he had experienced of the trials Christians endured during the time of persecution when Rome was suspicious of anyone who did not worship the emperor.

John's main aim was to provide a source of encouragement for his fellow Christians. The visions tell of the hardships endured by the faithful and the ultimate reward they would receive for their fidelity. He had visions of the persecutors coming to a sticky end while the followers of Christ were vindicated with unending glory in paradise.

Psalm 24 The responsorial psalm is a song that acknowledged the uniqueness of God as creator of heaven and earth. It was probably composed during the time of the exile when the citizens of Jerusalem were captives in Babylon (597-538 BCE). The psalmist sings of the superiority of YHWH over the deities of Babylon. Here is another composition that was designed to encourage the people of God in exile.

The poet is convinced that those who remain faithful to God will be rewarded in the end. They will be freed from captivity and allowed to return home to Israel. Those who earnestly seek the face of the Lord will lead good lives and qualify to be in the divine presence.

The love of God astonishes and fills with wonder those who stop and think about it

1 John 3:1-3 The second reading comes from the first letter of John in which love is the dominant theme, particularly, the love God has lavished on humanity and the love we should all have for God and for each other. In John's view of things the love of God is inexplicable. It is so unlike human love that we cannot understand the magnitude of divine love. We find it difficult to comprehend how anyone can love the unlovable and yet we can see examples of it in parental love and various forms of unconditional love.

Ask your dog about unconditional love! The love of God astonishes and fills with wonder those who stop and think about it and John is encouraging his community to stop and reflect on the immense love of God. He reminds us that we are children of God and dearly loved. People who do not know God cannot even begin to understand this, but those who love are like God who is love itself. Finally, John urges us to be worthy of the love of God by living according to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 5:1-12 The gospel reading is Matthew's grouping of some of the sayings of Jesus. We know them as the Beatitudes. The name comes from the Latin *beatus*, which means blessed, and yet the Latin word is not quite an accurate rendering of the original Aramaic that Jesus would have used. The Aramaic *touvaihoun* means it is a good and honourable thing. Jesus is saying it is good and honourable to be human, to experience weakness, suffering and loss as a human being. It is a good and wholesome thing to be generous, to reach out to others, to be passionate about justice and leading lives characterised by integrity and goodness.

In ancient Jewish and Mediterranean societies the code of honour and shame was a key value system in human interaction. People were more concerned to preserve and increase their honour than any other social pursuit. Maintaining honour and avoiding shame were issues of major significance for people of all classes. One could be poor or rich, low-born or noble and still be honourable. These statements that we traditionally call the Beatitudes are actually testimonials of endorsement. Jesus is really saying that there is no loss of honour in being an innocent victim and that there is no shame in being proactively positive in our relationships with others.

There is no shame in being human and vulnerable

This is not about being humble. Jesus begins by declaring that those who are poor in spirit, that is, who are wretched in their spirit, depressed, or suffering some kind of misery are still able to be honourable. He is saying that mental anguish is not a sign of God's disapproval nor should it be a source of shame. Jesus is addressing a common notion, put forward by the religious leaders of his day, that people who endure physical and mental suffering are being punished as sinners. His attitude is that this equation is not valid. One can be in a state of suffering and still be close to God, still be part of the reign of God.

Similarly, those who mourn are hardly happy, but they are honourable inasmuch as their sorrow comes from the loss of a loved one. To mourn is to have loved, and this is an honourable position to be in.

The gentle are also honourable people. Gentleness or meekness comes not from weakness but from a position of strength. The gentle are comfortable inside their own skins; they don't have to prove anything to others; they do not have to win or have the last word. The gentle are thoughtful of others, gracious, not defensive, and appreciate others. The truly gentle are mature and considerate in all their dealings with others. They are definitely godly people and contradict the values of many around them who strive to be socially better and more esteemed than their neighbour.

In a society that can often regard mercy as weakness or surrender, Jesus is saying that the merciful are strong and honourable people. They are big enough to forgive without counting the cost and are able to feel genuine compassion.

The pure in heart are those who are straight. Their motives are always honourable, and they are honest in all their relationships. The pure in heart are not sneaky or deceitful and consequently are honourable.

Those who look for the good in others are able to be peace brokers. They do not harbour grudges and their attitude toward others makes for peace and harmony. Their promotion of peace and reconciliation makes them special children of God.

Notice how all these Beatitudes deal with our relationships

Jesus is also assuring his followers that any persecution they suffer for their commitment to him does not bring shame. Suffering abuse and calumny could certainly make one feel less a person and engender a feeling of dishonour, but Jesus is saying that not only is this an honourable situation but one for rejoicing, for their reward would be great in heaven.

In sum, Jesus is saying that it is quite OK to be human and to suffer the ills and misfortunes that are part of the human condition. Physical and mental sufferings are not automatic signs of divine disfavour. Being human is not a cause for shame. Striving with passionate endeavour for justice and being positive in our lives is not only honourable but highly desirable.

Notice how all these Beatitudes deal with our relationships and the way we maintain mature and healthy connections with God, those we encounter in life, ourselves and the environment we live in. Life is good when our relationships are flourishing.

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There is no happiness higher than tranquillity. Gautama Buddha

The only way you can ever hope to be loved is to stop asking for it and start giving it; you get love only when you give it to others. Dale Carnegie

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Why were the lion and the witch in the wardrobe?

It's Narnia business.

Laurie Woods