

St Mary Abbots  
All Saints, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2022  
Isaiah 65:17-end Hebrews 11:32-12:2  
Father Christopher

*'For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth.'* In the name of the Father...

Our first reading goes on: *'... [B]e ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create.' 'The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock. ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord.'*

This is not a description of what Isaiah has seen, but a vision of a dream-like future, a new creation. Who knows whether on this side of the grave, or only in the apocalypse, when all shall be revealed? Why do we have this reading for today, for All Saints?

Well, probably because it gives us something of a foretaste of what we expect heaven to be like – of what we expect the saints to enjoy after this life, though we can only see such things as in a glass darkly. But also, I think, or at least I *like* to think, because the saints give us something of a foretaste of that world, of that kingdom, now, in our own world.

When I say 'saints', I do not just mean those who have been canonised – recognised by the church as having been particularly holy, with the prefix 'Saint' before their name. I mean all those holy men and women who make up the Church of God: you in other words. That is, after all, how St Paul refers to his brothers and sisters in the church when he says 'greet the saints' – οἱ ἅγιοι, in Greek - the holy ones.

In our second reading, from the letter to the Hebrews, we hear something of the author's idea of who the saints were. This passage is known for its wonderful description of those who *'through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions.'* And so it goes on: those who were stoned, 'sawn asunder', 'slain with the sword'.

They are not however the ones he is praising if you listen carefully. He lists those holy men and women of the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, who have *'obtained a good report through faith'*, though they have not received 'the promise' he goes on to say, because *'God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.'*

The great *'cloud of witnesses'* which he speaks of as compassing his audience roundabout, is not those of the past – not all those he has just described achieving those great feats; it is in fact those of the present and the recent past. There have since then been another almost 2,000 years of Christianity and the Church of course, with many saints, but in this passage, the 'cloud of witnesses' is a very real present one.

It is right that we celebrate all those great men, women and children who have witnessed to the faith over the centuries. But we should not do so to the exclusion of the saints we are surrounded with now.

It is very easy to be cynical in the church today: to see bureaucratic, apparently centralising, measures, seeking to cope with and reverse declining numbers. To see rural parishes amalgamating, services taking place less and less regularly, and with fewer priests. And yet - one of the promises which we make at our ordination as priests is to look for the signs of God's new creation: what we began with in Isaiah. And to *'discern and foster the gifts of all God's people, that the whole Church may be built up in unity and faith.'*

These might sound rather abstract, but in parish ministry they are a large part of our daily work. Even if the Church of England might be experiencing a decline in numbers, that is not the story we are interested in, and to obsess about it will only make it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We are not told to discern the central mission statistics, but to discern the signs of God's new creation, and to foster the gifts of all God's people. In other words, as it is often put now, to see where the Holy Spirit is at work and join in. And you may sometimes think when we ask for volunteers for things we are just looking for people to 'do jobs' or to 'fill gaps' that need filling.

In fact, you are the church, you are the saints even, and we are always seeking to discern the gifts that are here, and the ways in which the Holy Spirit is moving among you – among us. And in doing that, we are actually affirmed and renewed in our faith. And frankly humbled by the faith and dedication of many of you. Which in turn inspires us in our faith and ministry.

It is even embarrassing when people praise us, because I think we both probably think that we find more holiness among you, who do not have to do what you do as part of your work:

- Those of you who day in day out log-in to say your prayers at 8 in the morning, or come here at 5.30 to close your day in prayer.
- Who do you think cleans the church? I shan't name names, but suffice it to say that we do not pay anyone to do it.
- The person who as part of our homeless ministry messaged me in the week to say that she had taken some new clothes to the homeless man who wanted something smart to wear to visit his children for the first time in years.
- Those who make soup for us to take out to the homeless, including one fleeing Ukraine who now wants to help others.
- The homeless person who asked for food for the woman begging near him in the High Street, while explaining to me that while he tries, he finds it hard not being able to fix her problems when she doesn't always want to be helped.
- Those who have contacted me to pay the rent of a Ukrainian family so that their child can remain at our school.
- The person who was telling Mother Emma and me in the week about feeling welcomed here, and has now in turn made another person feel welcome, who had felt awkward not knowing what to do in our liturgy.
- The person who is setting up a coffee morning for local refugees; the man who arranges the taking of all our food to the Dalgarno food bank every week (who incidentally goes to another church).
- And those many people who come into our church simply to weep or to pray for a friend or a child or a loved one or themselves.

I could go on and on and on – but this is just a few examples from the past week.

For those of you who might have thought our Mission Action Plan is another layer of unnecessary bureaucracy, all of these people are living out their discipleship; many are welcoming others; just as they are also reaching out to those in need.

These are not magic words for something that we are not already doing. They are words to describe what we as a community have together discerned the Holy Spirit is at work doing among us, and which we are celebrating and saying we want to see more of; to see deepening and growing, as our faith, hope and love also grow and deepen.

All of this is also what it is to be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And I have to say, as hard work as it often is, Mother Emma, Mother Alice and I are constantly in awe of the faith we find here – often the quiet faith and diligent, day in, day out, commitment to living it out, which is

actually so much more powerful than all of those escapings from the edge of the sword, and turnings to flight of the armies of aliens.

Today, as well as celebrating all those saints over the ages and across the world, we also rejoice at the cloud of witnesses which compass us about here, the saints of this corner of our world – in other words, you. Alleluia!