Sunday 1 November 2026 – All Saints Day - The Beatitudes – Ian Wallis

Today is the Festival of All the Saints in the Church Calendar. Ian Wallis puts the teachings of Jesus known as the Beatitudes in their contemporary context of differing Jewish notions of holiness and shows how Jesus opens a window on what holiness can be, one that challenges us today.

Readings:

Revelation 7:9–17. Matthew 5:1–12

Sermon: The Beatitudes – Ian Wallis

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Trinity – most of us are familiar enough with the shape of the Christian year, as well as with the principal festivals that characterise these seasons. What may not be so well known is that there are also dozens of minor festivals and feast days commemorated annually, many of which are dedicated to a particular class of persons deemed worthy of our attention, some of whom are saints with a capital 'S', who have been beatified and canonised, and many of whom haven't and yet are still memorialised and commended to the church for one reason or another.

Among their number are the Gospel Evangelists and the founding apostles, including St Paul, as you would expect. Then there is a much broader selection of bishops, contemplatives, creatives, evangelists, founders, guides, humanitarians, martyrs, missionaries, monarchs, pioneers, priests, reformers, teachers, theologians, writers and the like who have found their way into what is called the *Sanctorale*, the calendar of the sacred.

Here's a selection from this month: Richard Hooker, Leonard the Hermit, William Temple, Margery Kempe, Leo the Great, Martin of Tours, Margaret, Queen of Scotland, Elizabeth of Hungary, Hilda of Whitby, Priscilla Lydia Sellon, Cecilia of Rome, Catherine of Alexandria, Isaac Watts.

If we were so minded, we could work our way through the entire sacred calendar and, if we did, there would be names we recognised with approval, others we didn't and others still that left us, quite frankly, bemused, wondering how so-and-so made the cut or even whether they ever existed – including the patron saint of Old Blighty, Saint George!

Then, towards the end of the Christian year, we would encounter a sort of round-up commemoration, All Saints Day, which, as it happens, we observe today, when we are invited to reflect on what characterises a saint, why they merit particular honour and who we would count among their number.

To aid us in this task we are offered one of the core biblical texts defining the Christian Way, the Beatitudes. Let's hear them again:

> *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

They sound profound, don't they, striking deep chords within us, causing us to sense something of true significance is being communicated – comparable, perhaps, to Moses returning from mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. And yet, I must confess to finding the Beatitudes at least mildly patronising, perplexing and perceptive in equal measure. Let me try to explain why.

Patronising, because I don't believe anyone, even Jesus, is in a position to make pronouncements relating to the well-being or otherwise of another group of people, most of whom they have never met. Take, for instance, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.' How could Jesus possibly know? Surely, he must have realised this wasn't always the case and, if you were counted among the forlorn bereft, would you find solace in these words? I very much doubt it. And what about the merciful – is their mercy always reciprocated? Not in this life, it isn't.

Why, then, perplexing? Because the meaning of most, if not all, of the Beatitudes is opaque. For example, who are the meek and how will they inherit the earth – clearly, not after they die when they would have little need of it, so how will it be accomplished in this life? Or, again, what kind of satisfaction accompanies those who pursue righteousness and what does righteous even mean in this context? Enigmatic, indeed!

And why perceptive? Preciously, because they are patronising and perplexing. Like many of Jesus' parables they are disturbing – stopping us in our tracks, challenging our assumptions, requiring us to think again, on this All Saints Day, about what constitutes saintliness or holiness – for the English word 'saint' derives from the Latin, 'sanctus' – meaning, 'consecrated' or 'made holy.'

A promising point of departure, I think, is the recognition that in Jesus' day, there was almost universal agreement among Jews that God was holy and expected God's people to be holy, succinctly affirmed in the refrain, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy' recorded in the book of Leviticus (19.2; also 11.44, 20.26). However, this is where the unanimity ended for there was considerable divergence and debate over what it meant to be holy.

For example (and here I'm having to simplify things), the Pharisees, whom we encounter in the New Testament, pursued holiness through obeying Torah – observing the Ten Commandments and their application of the same to all situations in life. While the Sadducees, serving as priests maintaining the sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem Temple, sought holiness through ritual purity.

Or, again, the Qumran community, custodians of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, believed holiness required withdrawal from the world and devotion to a strict rule of life. Whereas other Essenes formed networks within villages and townships where holiness took the form of a common life of study, labour, shared meals, care for the needy and upright living.

Then, of course, there was John the Baptiser for whom the pursuit of holiness demanded moral transformation – turning away from past transgressions and embracing a life of justice and good works. Nor should we overlook those self-appointed messiahs and freedom fighters, sometimes referred to as Zealots, who believed that holiness would return to the promised land once it had been purged of all foreigners and apostates.

And it is within this climate characterised by competing interpretations of what living in the light of God's holiness means and entails that we hear Jesus pronounce the Beatitudes in which he lays out the contours for a further exposition – profoundly different from some, maintaining resonances with others – yet grounded in his own experience of God's holiness that he sought to embody personally.

To my mind, this fresh exposition of holiness only comes into focus when contrasted with these other alternatives where we discover that it isn't a measure of one's righteousness or piety or purity, nor is it accomplished through withdrawal from corruption and jeopardy, nor can it be secured through armed conflict. That's because holiness isn't an attainment or reward or condition; it is, rather, a vocation, a sharing in and responding to the pain of the world. It is a holiness rooted in solidarity and compassion.

You see, in the Beatitudes Jesus isn't offering consolation to anyone unfortunate enough to experience certain things or to possess certain dispositions – nor is he promising them release from their predicaments or recompense for their endeavours. Instead, well, this is how Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, expressed it:

> *When Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, he does not say 'these are the things you must do', he says 'these are the sorts of people and the sorts of situations where you see something called blessedness'. It is not first an agenda to work for. It is a window that is opened.*

'… these are the sorts of people and the sorts of situations where you see something called blessedness … It is not first an agenda to work for. It is a window that is opened.' And that window enables us to catch a glimpse of what holiness rooted in solidarity and compassion looks like.

If we had time, we could unpack this in some detail and, along the way, discover the challenges of translating the Beatitudes into another language, never mind another culture. Instead, let me offer a brief sketch and one that inevitably reflects certain interpretative choices.

According to the Beatitudes, holiness begins in the recognition of our absolute dependence on God. And out of this vulnerability comes an openness to the suffering of others and readiness to share in their pain. Such clarity of purpose engenders resolve and inspires response. To uphold righteousness through the pursuit of justice. To practice mercy through acting out of love unconstrained by fear. To maintain purity through integrity of character and single-mindedness of purpose. To build peace through healing and reconciliation. To be ready to suffer the consequences of embodying such a vocation.

A holiness rooted in solidarity and compassion. If we are on the right lines here, then the Beatitudes redefine what saintliness is and, by implication, who are its outstanding exponents and advocates, which helps to explain the inclusion of some characters in the church's sacred calendar, but by no means all. It also invites us to reflect on whom we would wish to include among their number – those who have served as saints in our lives or in the life of St Mark's or more broadly.

When Liz and I were based at a church in the North-East, we started to develop a local sanctorale, which found liturgical expression through a Celtic Eucharist prepared by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community. It included the following invocation which we adapted to reflect our own church's story:

> *Heaven is here, and earth, and the space is thin between. Distance may divide, but Christ's promise unites those bounded by time, those blessed by eternity.*
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> *Heaven is here, and earth, and the Church above and below is one. Peter is here and Paul, Martha and all the Marys, Aidan and Cuthbert, Gilpin, Goodman, Gwilliam and Haines; the saints from far back and those who left us not long ago. And only sight prevents us from seeing them, one with us on the other side.*
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> *Heaven is here, and earth, and the God who made them is present. The Lamb, glorious*

on the throne, sits beside us; the Spirit of God, the Dove, makes her resting place among us. God inhales the breath of our prayers and spreads a table for our satisfaction.

Let heaven be glad;

Let the whole earth cry, 'Glory!'

'Gilpin, Goodman, Gwilliam and Haines.' I wonder who would take their place for us and why?

Let us pray.

God of all holiness,
you call us to embody your compassion for the world.
We thank you for those who have gone before us –
who, through the offering of their lives,
revealed Christ to all who cared to look.
Grant us the same grace by which they lived,
that Christ may be seen in us also. Amen.

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