

Sunday 2 November – All Saints Day

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk))

Recently, as we approached our coming vacancy we had a meeting of the team council, with the Archdeacon present, in which one of the questions we had to consider, as well as what the Church's priorities are, was "What are the main assets we as a Church have?". I think that the representatives from all our Churches recognised that the answer was not our buildings, not our historical artefacts, and not how much money we hold in our reserves. No, our greatest assets are the people that actually comprise our Church congregations.

Our Gospel reading this morning is taken from Luke's account of one of Jesus' best known sermons, the "Sermon on the Plain". Luke's version is subtly different from an account in Matthew which, because of both the different content and the different place (one a mount, the other a plain) we can safely conclude were two separate occasions. Matthew (in the Sermon on the Mount) begins with the well-known Beatitudes, which he sees as the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament Law. The Beatitudes speak to us of the life of the Kingdom of Heaven. They speak both of a reality to come and of a reality which can be shared in anticipation throughout discipleship, our relationship with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Matthew writes:

"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 shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Matthew 5:3-6

You'll notice that in Matthew they are in the third person - "the merciful", "the pure in heart", "the peacemakers", and "the persecuted". In Luke they are more directly addressed to Jesus' listeners:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you... on

account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven" Luke 6:20-23

They are followed (in Luke) by a series of woes, which directly parallel the blessings:

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, or you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." Luke 6:24-26

These are likewise directed at the listeners, in the second person "you". They should not be thought of as a condemnation of those who are rich, well-fed, happy, or well thought-of. Rather, for those who already have all these blessings, they are a reminder not to put our faith in these things and neglect to do anything to help those who are without them. The challenges of Jesus are as good for us, and the world, as are his graces. They are just as much part of the good news. Luke's account of the Sermon on the Plain, like Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, speaks both of that reality to come and of a reality which can be shared in anticipation throughout discipleship, our relationship with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. It follows a theme in Luke's Gospel of how Jesus will turn the world upside-down - though you might better say rightside-up. It's there in the Magnificat, when Mary sings of how God has:

"... brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Luke 1:52-53

It's there in the parable of Lazarus and the (unnamed) rich man when Abraham explains to the rich man:

"Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." Luke 16:25

The Jesus in Luke's Gospel really lives up to the mission statement that formed the centre of last week's Gospel passage, when Jesus, in the Synagogue, reads from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Luke 4:18-19

Then tells everyone present:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:21

The Church is Christ's body, we are all called to continue the work He began. That has been the mission and purpose of the Church since its very beginning, it should be our purpose as we seek to be Jesus' followers here, in the community of which we are a part.

Today is All Saints' Day, a day on which we celebrate all those who through the ages, in this Church and in others, have lived lives of service and love. The people who are elevated to the status of "saints" are not simply those who have done good works, but people whose lives have been marked by devotion to our Lord and dependence upon him. They are people in whom we see the truth that those who seek to serve God in his world are thrown back upon his grace; upon the means of grace which he has provided in his Church. We see in them devotion manifested not only in their works or even their private lives, but also in their communion with God and their fellow-human beings. With them we come to kneel at the altar with empty hands. With them we go out to love and serve the Lord.

Amen.