

## 2023 November 5<sup>th</sup> - All Saints' Day (transferred).

Revelation 7:9-end; Psalm 34:1-10; 1

John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12.

I wonder what image comes into your mind when you think of all the saints? Did you think of someone in a stained glass window, or someone depicted in a statue in a cathedral or church, or someone famous for exceptionally good deeds? Did you think of someone long dead, or recently martyred? Did you think of someone kind and friendly, or someone a bit austere and pious?

Being a saint often sounds like a lot of hard work: all that praying and being super-spiritual and never slumping in front of rubbish telly while eating a large carton of ice-cream, or packet of crisps or box of chocs! Living with someone who's a saint also sounds like a lot of hard work - how on earth could any of us cope with someone who spent all their time praying and being super-spiritual and never slumping in front of the telly, never mind indulging in a good gossip!

Somehow we feel that saints are "other", and on the whole we're quite happy about that. Saints are "other" and they are other people, quite different from us. They are all right in their own place, but their place is not with us.

However, our Bible readings remind us that saints are not "other", they are people like us. Saints are not spiritual super-heroes who make themselves super-good by their own super-human abilities. Rather, saints are people who have been caught up in the love of God the Father, saved by the blood of Jesus the Son and filled with the power of God the Holy Spirit. Saints are made, not born; and saints are made by God, they are not self-made.

We are all called to be saints, to be those people drawn into God and drawn into God's goodness. Living as a saint *is* hard work, as Jesus himself acknowledges when he speaks the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. We are blessed by God when we are poor, humble, hungry for righteousness, merciful, pure and reviled and persecuted. Living a life that is open to God's blessing does require constant attention to God and to ourselves, it does require prayer and spiritual discipline, but being blessed by God, being God's saint is not primarily about us adopting a difficult way of life. Being a saint is about being adopted by God.

In 1 John 3:1-3, St John reminds us how amazing and wonderful it is that God has called us to himself, how amazing and wonderful it is that God loves us as ourselves, how amazing and wonderful it is that God transforms us towards himself. St John is continually amazed by how

knowing and loving God makes him more like God. He's not struggling with the hard work of living a godly way, he's revelling in the fact that he is seeing more and more of God each day and he is becoming more and more like God each day.



That transformation from one degree of glory to another, that reformation by God and for God culminates in our reading from Revelation, where St John the Divine sees countless thousands and thousands from every nation under the sun worshipping God. These are the people, ordinary everyday people, people like you and me who have turned to Christ in their baptism and daily in their lives and who have allowed him to love them into his shape and likeness. And now they see him face to face and love him as he loves them.

I wonder what image comes into your mind when you think of all the saints? Could it be your own image? Your happiest, most joyful image? Your face reflecting God's image, God's love, God's joy in knowing and loving you?

John Goss's setting of verses from Revelation "These are they that follow the Lamb" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFM92BSORY0>

Image: **Cosimo Rosselli** The sermon on the mount . Sistine Chapel, Vatican City

## 2023 November 12<sup>th</sup> - Remembrance/Third before Advent.

Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70;

1Thessalonians 4:13-end; Matthew 25:1-13.

November, the season of remembrance. All Saints' Day when we remember all those who try to live for Christ and like Christ; All Souls' Day when we remember all those who have died in the faith of Christ; Guy Fawkes Day when we remember those who have sought justice in God's name; Remembrance Day when we remember those who have fought and died for the sake of liberty. We won't agree with everyone who is a saint, nor with everyone who tries to reform politics, and not everyone is comfortable with fighting as a way to bring peace, but this month places a demand on us to remember all those who have striven to make the world safe, just and loving, to remember all those who have lived their prayer "may your kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus taught us to pray daily for the kingdom of heaven to be realised here on earth. This prayer is not a one-off petition, nor a petition to be saved up for special days only. The prayer that God's kingdom may come here and now is a prayer for every person to make every day; it acknowledges both our dreadful propensity to turn our backs on the kingdom of God, and also our sublime calling to enter into the kingdom and live it out here and now as well as in the world to come.

The daily repetition of the prayer for the coming of God's kingdom is a daily reminder that we must be ready, on the look-out for the places where God's kingdom is breaking into our world so we can go there too. We must also look out for those places where the hope for and experience of God's kingdom is stifled so we can be there too, bringing with us our longing for and action in God's kingdom here and now.

Our reading from Amos reminds us that God's desire for the earth is that it should reflect his nature, his justice and mercy. This is his desire for the whole earth, this is the world he made good for people from every nation, this should be the aim of politicians local, national and international. Our reading from 1 Thessalonians reminds us that every day that passes brings us closer to the second coming of Christ, when he will judge both the living and the dead, and all who will follow him will enter into his kingdom to experience absolute justice and mercy.

These demands for justice, for mercy, for the signs of God's kingdom coming here on earth as it is in heaven are things we pray for daily, and

things we try to live out. But this year, this month, this day, the demand for justice and mercy for peace and forgiveness for change rings out with a new urgency and a new vigour for there are wars and rumours of wars all around us.

The Geneva Academy reports that there are forty-five armed conflicts at this moment in North Africa and the Middle East more than thirty-five across the rest of Africa; twenty-one in Asia; seven in Europe and six in South America - and that's just the major conflicts. We find it almost impossible to remember all the places of warfare all the time; we cannot cope with contemplating all the suffering, all the bloodshed, all the murder and maiming; we cannot absorb all the demands for justice and reparation; we cannot understand all the claims and counter-claims. Sometimes we just want to switch off the news, throw out the papers and forget that war is happening to people like us in so many places just today. We might forget about the ravages of war, but the people who suffer the destruction of war will never forget.

Our Gospel reading is about people who remember and people who forget, the bridesmaids who keep looking out for the coming of the bridegroom and those who doze off and are unprepared when he arrives. In the context of Remembrance Sunday and this season of remembering, perhaps this Gospel encourages us to continue to pray for God's kingdom to come, and to look out for the signs of Jesus in our world. We cannot end wars, we cannot change political and military activity, but we can remember before God all who suffer in warfare and from warfare, and every day we can pray "Give peace in our time, O Lord, because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God." God will remember those caught up in warfare, God will not ignore the cry of their prayers.



A reminder of the installation of poppies at the Tower of London in 2014: one for each British combatant dead in WW1. How many poppies would we need to remember everyone who died in that war, let alone everyone who died in conflicts in the past century?

<https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/#qs.7rbf1v>. image accessed 2/11/23 1400.

## 2023 November 19<sup>th</sup> - Second before Advent

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-end; Psalm 90:1-8;

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Nearly everything we have read in the book of the prophet Jeremiah has been miserable! Mind you, there was a good reason for that. Jeremiah had been warning people that if they turned their back on God they would no longer be able to see him, if they walked away from God they would no longer be able to reach him. Yet, they still lived their lives as if God didn't really matter, as if they could do whatever they liked and God wouldn't notice when they did wrong. No wonder Jeremiah wept because he could see which way the world was going and it wasn't a good way.

But today, he looks forward, and ahead of him, he sees hope. Although the Babylonians will invade Judah, will destroy the temple and the monarchy, will take many, many hundreds of people into captivity, will do terrible deeds, despite all this disaster in the immediate future, Jeremiah has hope that God will bring the disaster to the end and will bring restoration to the people of Israel, God is giving them hope.

So, today Jeremiah does not weep. God watched over Israel as she was destroyed, now he will watch over Israel as she is restored and a key part of that restoration is God writing his law in people's hearts.



He made a covenant with his people when he brought them into the Promised Land, but they could not keep their part of the covenant, their hearts were too hard, too stubborn, too selfish. So now, God is giving his people new hearts, hearts that will beat in time with God's heart, hearts that will pump God's life round their bodies, hearts that will thrill with the things that thrill God.

Note – original Oct 22 file converted for reuse DJ

NOT USED – Ely Diocesan substituted

The life and joy that God wants his people to know is embodied in his Law. That's what Psalm 119 is all about; it's a hymn of praise to God because of his law. On the whole, in our individualistic 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture we're not so thrilled by laws. We resent someone telling us what to do, although we resent even more those who break the laws, even if we ourselves find the laws irksome! However, for the Psalmist, the laws are special and precious because they encapsulate God's love, they paint pictures for us of how God's love shapes the world, and they give us guidance for how we can colour in the picture God's way. So the law is something beautiful, not irksome, because it is God's law and God's love. And Jeremiah said that with God's love in our hearts we can live according to God's law.

That is what Paul is writing about to Timothy in the Epistle. He says that Timothy knows God's law because he knows God's love, so now he needs to live out that law so that he can live out that love.

These three readings all hang together as an exploration of what it means to try to live like someone who lives in God's love. So what on earth is the Gospel about. Is it really saying that praying to God is like badgering an unwilling and unjust judge to give us what we want? I don't think so. We have to remember that this is a story, and that some of the story is just there to be story, whereas some of it is there to make a point. The point that I hear Jesus making is this: you would go all out to beg an unjust judge for a good outcome without being sure that he would actually be fair to you, so, if you'd go all out with an unjust judge, won't you pray even more to a just God, who loves you and who wants to give you good things.

And the good things God wants to give is his love, shewn to us in new and transformed hearts, made clear to us through his laws of love.

image <https://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-192565585/stock-photo-red-soft-heart-small-pillow-shape-in-asian-female-hands-for-valentines-day-concept-on-green-grass-background-with-soft-yellow-sunlight-selective-focus> accessed 4/11/23 5pm

## 2023 November 19<sup>th</sup> - Feast of Christ the King

Ezekiel 34: 11-16 and 20-24; Psalm 95: 1-7;  
Ephesians 1: 15 – end; Matthew 25: 31-end

If you visit the church of St Peter, Wenhaston in Suffolk you will see an extraordinary depiction of the Day of Judgement (see below). This type of painting is known as a 'Doom' showing as it does the separation of the saved and the damned on that last day. It was intended for the instruction of the faithful, and the not so faithful, at a time when literacy rates were low and visual depictions of biblical themes were common.

It has survived because it was covered over with whitewash, possible around 1500 and so escaped discovery by Cromwell's men. Then, during restoration work in 1892 it was taken down and put out in the churchyard, perhaps intended for the bonfire. But rain in the night washed off the whitewash and the magnificent painting, on wood, was revealed.

I mention this today because we come to the end of the church's year, and these few weeks leading up to the start of a new church year (with Advent) are weeks in which we consider the end times – death and judgement, heaven and hell – but at the end of this we remind ourselves that Christ is King and will ultimately triumph over the evil that is so apparent in the world of today.

What this period of the church's year does is to invite us to take stock – to make sure that we are as prepared as we can be for Advent and Christmas. There seems to be a bit of a vogue on the television these days for makeover programmes, and particularly de-cluttering. Mostly these seem to involve families who have accumulated so much stuff that they can barely live in their houses, and most importantly they have lost sight of what is important. The process of de-cluttering takes the form of finding and recognising what really is important in the form of memories, mementoes and photographs, and giving these prominence in the newly tidied house. Isn't this exactly what we need to be doing with our lives? Recognising what is important and needs nurturing and what is simply unnecessary or even worse what is holding us back from living free and uncluttered lives. Let go of what you do not need, sort out that which holds you back in your faith – fears, prejudices, misunderstandings, guilt – some of it really needs to go! If you can let go of some of the things which hold you back, then at Christmas your hands will be empty, and open to give and receive the greatest gift ever – God with us.



Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kenbarley/16509802597>

### Prayer:

God the Father, help us to hear the call of Christ the King and to follow in his service, whose kingdom has no end; for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, one glory. Amen.

