

2 November sermon - All Saints Day
Matthew 5:1-12

'The Saints are those who, in some partial way, embody, literally incarnate, the challenge of faith in their time and place. In doing so they open a path that others might follow.' Robert Ellsberg

Joyce Rupp reflects: *'I have always been drawn to the feast of All Saints. It is a time to remember with gratitude all those persons whose goodness has inspired me in my beliefs and given me courage to act on what I believe. It is a day to acknowledge that these holy men and women have helped me find my own potential for goodness.'*

I think of saints as not only those women and men who have been canonised by the church, but all people whose lives reflect the goodness of God. Saints are not perfect people. They have their faults, idiosyncrasies, and weaknesses. They have their own struggles and difficulties. Even the canonised ones are noted to have been difficult to live with because of some of their unique mannerisms. Yet, the Saints are people of integrity. They have a central focus at the core of their lives: the love of God. They consistently choose to act out of that central reality, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary their lives may be'.¹

They choose to live the Beatitudes. They are blessed.

What is your experience of being blessed?

Is it something that happens?

Is it about an attitude to life?

Is it about being lucky? Looking for the good?

¹ *Out of the Ordinary prayers, poems and reflections for every season.* p32. Ave Maria Press
Notre Dame, Indiana, Joyce Rupp

I always remember Bill Facey's book entitled, 'A fortunate life'. His was a life which to many could seem anything but fortunate, yet he named it, 'a fortunate life'.

What is your experience of being blessed or fortunate, made holy, consecrated..? To me it is mostly about the little things, quiet moments, a smile, and mostly it is about taking time to actually notice these. It is about living a reflective life, a life based in the love of God.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes:

*A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship where both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another.*²

How wonderful it is, that today, on this All Saints Day, and Nikolai and my last Sunday at Holy Covenant, that our Gospel reading is the Beatitudes, Jesus' mission statement to his disciples, when he speaks about blessedness, about who he sees as blessed.

The version in Luke's Gospel is about the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are oppressed. They are the ones who are blessed. The kind of poverty Jesus spoke of was more than monetary poverty. It was brokenness, oppression, destitution. In Luke, Jesus speaks of his own mission in his home synagogue, announcing a way which would bring transformation and relief for the downtrodden, specifically, for the Israel of his time.³

In a creative development, Matthew's gospel changes the beatitudes, from promises to the poor and hungry, to challenges to his hearers to be 'poor in spirit' and to 'hunger after righteousness'. In Matthew the beatitudes are an invitation to a change of attitude. The kingdom of heaven will be for people like this. These are the blessed, Matthew's Jesus seems to say. And, if you want to enter

² © Rachel Naomi Remen, MD in "My Grandfather's Blessings"

<http://www.rachelremen.com/becoming-a-blessing/>

³ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEpiphany4.htm>

this blessedness, these are the attitudes and behaviours you need to develop.

The original sense of a promise to the needy has been left almost entirely behind, except for the promise to those who mourn and those who are persecuted. The rest are about attitude and behaviour: humility, lowliness, hunger for righteousness, purity of heart, being peacemakers, being compassionate.⁴

Why all this emphasis on attitude and behaviour? Why this change? Because it is central to Matthew's understanding of Jesus' message. He shows Jesus speaking in a way that will challenge believers not to rest on their status as Christians. He wants to say that achievements count for nothing if God's will is not being done. 'If you don't love, you are nothing!' to paraphrase St Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Love is the bottom line. Love and compassion are the hallmark of the discipleship for which Jesus calls. Discipleship is defined as a wholehearted commitment to loving and caring applied in every area of life. In Matthew, the beatitudes are good news, but also a pretty big challenge.

Loader writes that blessedness means espousing the yearning for God, wanting God's way of love to happen for people now, wanting a transformation that will be good news for oppressed people, not just in some distant future. Without this we can easily miss Matthew's point and spiritualise the beatitudes to the point that they become reduced to a kind of private and gentle morality which is inoffensive, but not likely to foster real change'.⁵

How would you describe the experience of being blessed?

I could talk about numerous blessings or encounters at Holy Covenant:

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

- The wonderful Resources team tirelessly caring for our buildings and grounds, fabulous staff, and hundreds of volunteers who care in so many ways and mirror God's love..
- special times of walking the labyrinth
- Children leading worship - Easter this year with a tardis, freshly baked bread, Jesus washing our feet, and after going to the cross outside, coming back in, then, miraculously Jesus appearing from behind the altar.
- presiding at the Eucharist one Christmas with a newborn Hurst grandchild wrapped in white cloth and held gently in the front row. Heaps of Encounter Services led by Katie Beresford, and especially Encounter God through Creativity.. painting on the sanctuary windows.
- Taize services, SALT services..
- walking the confirmation journey this year with 12 people ranging in age from primary school to retired. People experiencing illness, financial difficulties, job worries, loneliness through being new to Canberra, growing in love, acceptance, prayer and support
- CC@HC, among other things, growing a fresh expression of church.
- Young Adult Dinners at our place
- And pastoral visits, sitting one on one at coffee shops, homes, bedsides, encountering the truth of each other in times of sorrow and joy and the ordinary every day.

Being blessed means being at home in ourselves, creating a sacred space of encounter in the middle of an ordinary day.

Let me read some of Matthew's beatitudes to you from The Message Bible. Listen carefully, this is what he said:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God."

"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are - no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'carefull,' you find yourselves cared for.

"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

"Not only that - count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens - give a cheer, even! - for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.⁶

Rachel Remen says:

'In a highly technological world we may forget our own goodness and place value instead on our skills and our expertise. But it is not our expertise that will repair the world. Perhaps the future may depend less on our expertise than on our connection to one another and to life.'⁷

⁶ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5&version=MSG>

⁷ op cit

We are called to be saints, embodying, literally incarnating, the challenge of faith in our time and place. In doing so we open a path that others might follow, in so doing we bless and are blessed.

Saints of God, know that you are much loved.

God loves you, and I love you and will never forget you.

Saints of God, know that you are indeed richly blessed, wherever you are on your life journey.

You are also a blessing to me and to many.

Susanna Pain

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