

Homily: All Saints 2021

“Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the hill.” So begins today’s Gospel, this very famous and beautiful passage known as the Beatitudes. We might ask: why did Jesus go up the hill when He saw the crowds? Was He seeking some solitude, some peace and quiet? The Gospel gives us the answer: “There He sat down and was joined by His disciples.” Now we see: Jesus did not go up the hill to escape the crowd, but to lead them: He calls them, as many as are willing to respond to His voice, to go up with Him. Today’s first reading has already told us the ultimate goal of this ascent. St John, the visionary in the book of the Apocalypse, is shown the scene in heaven, where he sees “a huge number, impossible to count, from every nation, race, tribe and language.” These are the saints in heaven, the ‘crowd’ whom Jesus has seen and has led to the heights of eternal glory. This same vision is put before us today: we celebrate the countless multitude of those who already live the life of heaven in the company of our Lord. The canonised saints, yes, but also those who are now forgotten by the world, those whose names and stories are no longer remembered, and even those whom we have known: our family members, friends and fellow parishioners who already enjoy salvation. But as we look on this vision, we are not looking upon a group whose lives are detached from ours. We are looking on our brothers and sisters, those who have lived here, like us, and struggled here, just as we do. Like us, they are part of the Church. In fact, the Church *is* the Communion of Saints: those of us on earth who are striving to be holy, those who are undergoing their final purification – the holy souls whose memory we keep on Tuesday – and those who are already in heaven, the saints whose feast we celebrate today. We are part of that same crowd which is, on the one hand, still climbing the hill here on earth, and, on the other, has already reached the summit.

In a way, then, today’s feast is really a feast of the Church, the family of God. There are not two families of God: one on earth and one in heaven; there is only one family, which spans this life and the next. We are all part of that one family, the one Body of Christ, as St Paul teaches. Jesus is both divine and human: He is of heaven and also of the earth. And His mystical Body, the Church, is the same, living in heaven and also here on earth. Paul teaches that when one part of the body is shown honour, all parts rejoice in this gift. So today, as we celebrate the saints in glory, we also recognise our own dignity. Their prayers help us in our need; likewise, our prayers for the holy souls in purgatory help them on their way to salvation; and our prayers for one another help us to grow in holiness. The prayers and the actions of each and every one of us affect the whole Church.

On Friday I was on the M6 and saw about 20 police riot vans heading north, no doubt going to Glasgow for the UN climate conference taking place there over the next two weeks. We are invited to pray for the success of these talks, for the benefit of our planet. Whatever big decisions are made there will have an impact on the world for many generations to come. But we also know that, on a much smaller scale, our own individual actions play a role. If I waste energy here, or generate too much rubbish, or dispose of things irresponsibly, there is an effect elsewhere in the world. The environmental crisis reminds us that we are part of a worldwide family, and each person’s actions affect our brothers and sisters in distant places, even in ways we never realise.

The Church has always understood this. St Paul, again, says, “When one part of the body suffers, all the rest suffer with it.” Our smallest failings in some way diminish the whole, and equally, our tiny efforts at holiness contribute the good of all. We know from the Bible that the early Church held all things in common. Nobody had possessions of their own; everything was held in a common fund. That remains true today, perhaps not with material things, but certainly in a spiritual sense. There are “spiritual goods”, so to speak: gifts of grace, holiness, faith, goodness – these are things that we may seek individually, but which benefit the whole world. No one is an island, especially in the family of God.

This truth is expressed very clearly by Caryl Houselander, a wonderful spiritual writer in the first half of the 20th century. She had quite a turbulent life, with a good deal of suffering, but she was gifted with the most profound spiritual insights and an ability to write with real freshness and relevance. In one of her books, *The Risen Christ*, which was published in 1958, a few years after her death, she wrote: “There are many people today in forced labour-camps hidden away from the world. There, unknown, nameless martyrs, most of them will die. The few who have escaped tell us that, of all their sufferings, none was so bitter as the sense of having been forgotten. But they are not forgotten; another unknown multitude, those who share willingly every day in Christ’s suffering on the cross, are always with them. When there seems no comfort left, suddenly, minute miracles happen: a gleam of sunlight, a bird’s song, a whispered word of encouragement, an unexpected hand-clasp; and they hope again. Some silly old lady somewhere, some little child in a distant schoolroom, is giving them the gentle solace of Christ’s tender love” (p. 23).

In a very simple but beautiful way, Caryl Houselander points out what it means to be part of the Communion of Saints. An old lady is saying the Rosary in our church or at home, or a child next door in our school makes some heartfelt prayer to God, and someone in the world benefits; in a sense, the whole world benefits. The lady or the child will not know it in this life, and the person who receives that gift has no idea where it came from, but the gift is given, the prayer takes effect. In each prayer, in each act of faith, each time we strive for holiness, we contribute to the spiritual good of the world, and our brothers and sisters benefit. The Carmelite nuns who devote their lives to prayer just around the corner from here also stand as a witness to this truth: their pursuit of holiness matters. They give their lives to this, not only because it helps them, but because it makes a difference to the world. Each step we make in holiness is a gift to others. But we do not just give; we also receive. We receive from our brothers and sisters still on earth, and we receive from those who are in heaven, whose feast we celebrate today. We celebrate them because they inspire us by their holy lives; we celebrate them because they intercede for us, giving us help in all our struggles; we celebrate them because they call us upward, inviting us to journey up the mountain with Christ, to that place where the earthly and heavenly family of God, the whole Church, the entire Communion of Saints, will one day be united in heavenly glory.

Fr Andrew

