

Homily: All Saints 2020

Some years ago I had a few days away in Munich. As part of my stay I took the train out to the little town of Marktl am Inn, in itself a fairly obscure little place, but with new significance in recent years because it is the birthplace of Pope Benedict. In the church there you can see the font where the future pope was baptised, on the day of his birth, back in 1927. Near the font is a plaque with a quote from Benedict – in German, it reads “Wer glaubt ist nie allein” – “The one who believes is never alone.” I was travelling alone, so I paused to think a little about these words. Soon afterwards, a group of young men all dressed in the same T-shirts came into the church. They prayed, sang together beautifully, and then prepared to leave. One of them came over to talk to me. It turned out they were seminarians, just beginning their journey to priesthood, visiting the town with a priest who was overseeing their formation. The group invited me to join them for lunch, which I did – and which the priest paid for – and I enjoyed getting to know them a little. It seemed to me that, in a way, Benedict’s words were made clear to me: the one who believes is never alone. We are always in the presence of God, and we are always part of a much larger family: the family of God, also known as “the Communion of the Saints”.

Today’s readings present us with two crowds of people: in the Gospel, Jesus begins His Sermon on the Mount, surrounded by a great crowd of those who followed Him. They are gathered around God incarnate, Jesus, here on earth. In the first reading, we see a vision of heaven, with angels and a huge number of saints gathered around the throne of God. The two scenes are almost like mirror images: God at the centre, the crowds gathered around. There are some differences: one is in heaven, and one on earth. On earth, the crowds gather around the Lord to be taught by Him, because they are still on their journey. In heaven, they have completed their journey, and so they no longer learn, but devote themselves only to praise and worship of God, who sits before them. Yet all are gathered around the same Lord, the same God. In a beautiful way, this shows us what the Communion of the Saints is: it is the family of all those, whether on heaven or in earth, or indeed in purgatory, who seek to look upon God, to be gathered around Him.

When this year began, I don’t think any of us knew just how much we would feel the need for human interaction. We miss the simplest things in life. Most of us have spent more time alone, or at least in very limited groups, than ever before. Today’s feast comes as a beacon of hope and comfort to us: we are never alone. We are part of the family of God that spans heaven and earth. We already belong to the Communion of Saints.

Back in March, when we first began livestreaming the Mass, it was very strange to celebrate Mass with just me and James in the church. And yet I knew it was not only us who were present in some way. I could not see anyone else, but I knew that many were joining us, many participating in the Mass, many people united with us in prayer. And that remains true today. This points us to a bigger truth: wherever Mass is celebrated, however many people are there, and whether or not it is livestreamed, there are always many present. At every Mass, the angels and saints are present. We gather around the Lord on earth, and they gather around Him in heaven. Gathered around the same Lord, we are close to each

other. We are united. Here we are united with the great saints of the Church, as well as countless men and women, most of whom forgotten by history, who live with the Lord. We are united with our loved ones who stand before the throne of God in eternal life. It is their feast that we celebrate today.

When we think of them, we know we are thinking of people who are completely happy. Their lives are perfect joy, because they look upon God. All their desires are fulfilled. There was a line in today's psalm which caught my eye: that those who will climb the mountain of the Lord and stand in His holy place are those "with clean hands and pure heart, who desire not worthless things." Today's feast is consolation for when we feel isolated, because it reminds us of the great cloud of saints who constantly accompany us by their unseen presence and by their prayers. And it's also an encouragement for us to continue on the path they have trod. The saints are those who did not desire worthless things, but those who set their hearts on the things of God. They hungered and thirsted for what is right, so they are satisfied. They learned to be pure of heart, so they look upon God. Many of them were persecuted, so their reward is great in heaven. They were merciful, so they have had mercy shown them for their own sins. This should be our path too – to live the beatitudes – and if it seems difficult, let's remember that we do not walk it alone. We are never alone. Because we have faith, we belong to the great Communion of the Saints, which encompasses and unites heaven and earth.

Fr Andrew

