

Who are the Blessed?
Bristol Cathedral 8am
All Saints 2020
Revelation 7:9-end, Matthew 5:1-12

If you are of a practical mind, today's readings may not appeal to you. The Book of Revelation, in particular, is full of outlandish visions which always remind me of those great cinema fantasy epics, like the Lord of the Rings, or the Hunger Games.

Jesus' teaching on the Mountain, those familiar words we call "the Beatitudes" seem equally fantastic, but in a different way, what my mother would have called "Pie in the Sky when you die" which seems little comfort to us here and now.

So, forgive me, but I want to try to enchant you today, to help you to see these bible passages as windows into the mind of God.

Firstly, I want to say a bit about the context in which the Book of Revelation was written, as it is a part of the Bible we don't encounter too often. The writer was putting down these words during a period of terrible suffering for Christians, when they were being persecuted by the Roman authorities: captured, tortured and executed for sport. They understood only too well what he meant when he talked about people who had "been through the great ordeal" because that was their lived experience.

The book of Revelation was written partly to comfort and reassure those who were facing great suffering, but it was also written to challenge Christians with a decision – do you collude with the authorities, with the prevailing culture of the day in order to have an easier life, or do you endure suffering and persecution for the sake of your faith?

Perhaps the challenges which face us are not so extreme, but they are none the less real, in a world in which faith in God is becoming more unusual and in which Christian moral standards and values can no longer be seen as "normal".

I want to come back to that idea in a few minutes. But first, I want you to see this lovely vision that John is putting before us, this vision of the blessed, of those who are loved by God.

God's response to suffering is to gather his children around him, to shelter them, to feed them, to give them something to drink. It sounds like a wonderful party!

The writer tells us that people of every nation, tribe and language are at this party. Let's stand at the door and look for a moment.

Everyone is in their party clothes, there are slinky satin dresses and sharp suits; there are colourful African prints and head wrappings; gold embroidered Indian silks; some people are in their pyjamas – whatever feels most comfortable, because at this party everyone looks their best!

There will be food and drink too, for this is a situation in which no-one is ever hungry or thirsty. Roast chicken and ice-cream; pizza and chips; sweet and sour, curry, porridge, potatoes, rice!

And what will the blessed daughters and sons of God do once they are in God's presence? They will sing!

They will worship God night and day in songs of everlasting love and praise. And somehow, the cacophony which ought to ensue when thousands of people raise their voices to sing in the way that they like best, will sound in harmony as they are united together. Imagine, the football fans and the Beyoncé fans, the hymns and the pop songs, Mozart and Miles Davis, the strains of Swahili and Mandarin, all coming together in one amazing choir.

This is God's plan for his children, those who Jesus tells us will be blessed.

So who are they, the blessed?

Stop for a moment and think about the people who were gathered around Jesus on that hillside in Galilee. Poor farmers and fishermen, widows and prostitutes, the disenfranchised and the downbeaten. They are used to being told that the way to please God is to obey the rules, pay your temple tax, don't work on the Sabbath. Things that are impossible to do when you don't have money, when your animals need feeding every day, and when the journey to the temple at Jerusalem requires a week's walk.

To these people, to the hungry, the poor and the meek, Jesus says, "You are blessed and you will see God".

There are times in life when we may also hear these words as words of comfort.

This is particularly true when we are mourning, in the days of bereavement, whether for a loved one, or even for some failed hope, some unrealised desire, it is good to be reminded: "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted".

But, you know, it is not all about us!

This beautiful vision is about God, about God's view of the world.

Jesus tells us that God's priority, God's honour and blessing, is for the people who get the least attention in the world in which we live. The people who, if we are honest, we pass by as well.

Today, the church celebrates the Feast of All Saints, that is the Feast of the Blessed, of those who are in the presence of God, enjoying that wonderful party, and joining in that song of praise.

It can sometimes feel as if there is a hierarchy of saints, the ones we know: St John, St Michael, St George, the saints that we name churches and schools after: then the lesser saints who get celebrated in groups: the Martyrs of the Reformation, the companions of Oscar Romero, and then there are all the rest: the unnamed, who we earnestly hope and pray include our own dear departed, your family and friends.

But this is not what Jesus tells us.

It is the least among us whom God values most highly.

God will drag them into the feast from the hedgerows and byways, from under the railway arches and from the dementia home and the cancer ward.

There is good news in the Gospel today for us when we feel that we are the left behind and the little ones.

There is challenge in the Gospel today to say to us, who do you bless? Who do you bless with your prayers, your time, your love?

That beautiful vision of life in which there will be no more hunger or thirst, no more mourning or tears, is it only Pie in the Sky when you die?

Is the Kingdom of God just a future hope, or can you imagine just a little of that Kingdom breaking into our world here and now?

When we gather to pray and to praise, to sing together and to share in the feast of the Eucharist, we gather to share in the life of heaven, the life of the Kingdom of God.

Amen