

Sermon 30.10.16

Rev Roger Walker

Luke 6: 20-31

Today's Gospel Reading is a puzzling one, and certainly does not seem to have a great deal to do with our celebration of All Saints. We hear Jesus teaching his disciples that if they are poor, hungry, weeping and hated they should rejoice, because they will receive a great reward in heaven. But if they are as we are - or as we would like to be - rich, well fed, laughing or spoken well of - then it is woe to them as they do not receive the great reward. The best interpretation we can put on this is that it was encouragement for Jesus' disciples, whose lives certainly were hard and who did know poverty, hunger and hatred. This was because they had given up everything to follow him and could well be tempted to look back longingly to their former lives.

For us it can be a message that when we seek to follow Jesus we cannot put selfish desires for riches and popularity at the centre of our lives, but rather have to be self sacrificing and live in a way that is contrary to so much that our society hold dear. Hence the last part of our Reading beginning 'love your enemies and do good to those who hate you'. We don't see much of that if we look around at our world today, for the message we get on our TV news and newspapers is rather: 'drop bombs on your enemies and put those who hate you in prison'. If we go on to the next sentence 'bless those who curse you and pray for those who ill treat you'. We might wonder what would happen if we applied this policy to our negotiations to leave the EU!

It is probably not possible to apply Jesus' teaching to international politics but it is certainly challenging in our own individual lives, for even if we would not call them enemies, we all have people we do not get on with. 'Love them' says Jesus: and this is not some wish washy sentiment, for love in the Bible means to seek someone's highest good. We can certainly do this for those with whom we disagree - trying to build them up rather than do them down, and reacting in the same way to any who show hatred towards us. If we say kind things to those who say unkind things to us, bless those who curse us and pray for those who behave badly towards us, we are not only going to avoid falling into sin ourselves but we will also puzzle our adversaries. We will make them stop and think, and probably behave better towards us. this is what St Paul was talking about when he quoted Proverbs in Romans 12:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he is thirsty, give him drink.

For in doing this you will heap burning coals on to his head'

It is a very poetic way of expressing how good behaviour in the face of enmity can bring a change of attitude. Paul continues: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'.

This is just what Jesus was urging when he continued his teaching - about turning the other cheek, allowing someone and not demand its return, to give to everyone who asks. As always, Jesus becomes hyperbolic in his teaching, going way over the top to make a point. But it did make people listen and it makes us think about our attitudes, even if we know there are times when we must apply wisdom to prevent others taking advantage of us totally. This is not actually seeking their highest good - loving them - and, just as St Paul had a simple summing up sentence in Romans, so too does Jesus at the end of today's Reading. 'Do to others as you would have them do to you'.

There is some good teaching in all of this about how to live as a Christian and improve our relationship with others, but why it was chosen to be read for All Saints' Day - there is one very appropriate sentence in the middle of the Reading, which we could almost miss as it is sandwiched between the two pieces of teaching about poverty and riches. 'Rejoice' says Jesus to his disciples, 'and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven'. That, he tells them, is where the prophets of the Old Testament who were ill-treated will be: and they will share their glory. They will be saints with a capital S. There are many who have followed in their footsteps, whom we also recognise as Saints with a capital S, including our own Saint Botolph. But the New Testament also speaks in many places, especially in Acts and the Epistles, of Christians as Saints with a capital S. The word Saint actually means holy one and we know that being holy means being set apart for the service of God. That is what Jesus was teaching today: that is what all the Saints with a capital S were - and we are also. In the words that St Paul often uses of his converts: 'called to be Saints'. That, as we read Jesus' demanding words today, is what he is asking of us - holiness - sainthood. That is leading us at the last to be with All His Saints in heaven.

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