

Sermon - Saints in the kingdom of heaven

Based on Revelation 7.9-17, 1 John 3.1-3, and Matthew 5.1-12 (NRSV)

Heaven, separated?

- As we celebrate All Saints Day, there are two aspects that I've been reflecting on: where and when we think heaven is, and the business of purifying ourselves.
- The first concerns the wording - the phrasing of words - in our usual prayers and hymns, that give us a sense of where heaven is.
- The reading from Revelation gives us a wonderful image of multitudes of people - of sanctified people - meaning the saints - gathered around the heavenly throne.
- And we somehow think of this throne, and all these people, as being completely removed from where we are.
- We understand that heaven, in this sense, is somewhere else - not here, not now.
- And we associate heaven as being a place, or a dimension - a spiritual, divine dimension - that only becomes accessible to us when we physically die.
- We separate this world, this life, this time, from that heaven, that life, that time.
- We are here, and then there is this division, the metaphorical river, that needs to be crossed first.
- And on the other side are those who have made it - the saints, the ones who have been called home by Jesus to the heavenly kingdom.
- There is here and now, and then there is there and then. Separated.

With us, now

- And yet there are clues that suggest that this idea of separation is quite a limited perspective.
- The first clue is that whenever we worship, we understand that we are doing so with the heavenly host - that we are effectively joining in with them - or maybe that they are joining in with us.
- That when we say 'they and us are worshipping together', we should be saying 'we are worshipping together' - meaning that we here hold onto the sense of being with them, and them with us - even now.
- And we do say this, at least every time we come to the Eucharistic prayer, because the *Sanctus* - the words of worship that start with '*Holy, holy, holy*' - is usually introduced by saying '*with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*', or similar words.
- 'With' means that we and they - all of us together - are worshipping at the same time.
- One idea is that in the heavenly dimension there is no time, so that it isn't that the worship has happened or that it's going to happen, but rather that it is happening, as an action that is ongoing, at all times.
- Regardless of our understanding of heavenly time, we can be confident that heaven is happening now.

Surrounded

- The next clue comes from phrases like '*since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*' (*Hebrews 12.1*).
- The writer of the letter to the Hebrews had been going through a list of the Israelite heroes in chapter 11: Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Rahab the prostitute, David, the prophets and others.
- And then chapter 12 starts by stating that we are surrounded by all these people.
- Not that we are here, and that they are somewhere over there - but that we are in the midst of them, that we are surrounded by them.
- The writers of the Scriptures, inspired by the Spirit, seem to understand that heaven is not somewhere else, at some other time, but rather that heaven is here and now.

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Heaven breaks through

- Another clue are the accounts of the heavenly dimension breaking through - or maybe just becoming apparent - at key moments in the life and ministry of Jesus:
- when the shepherds heard the angels sing, when Jesus was baptised, at his transfiguration, resurrection, and ascension.
- At all these times heaven, which is present here and now, became visibly manifest.
- And not just the moments where the action is happening to Jesus, but every time someone was healed, forgiven, restored.
- Throughout Matthew's Gospel account, Jesus keeps referring to the kingdom of heaven, and tells his disciples: *'As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."' (Matthew 10.7)*

Jesus with us

- Here's another clue: Jesus saying that whenever people gather together in his name, then he is present.
- Even though Jesus is already seated at the right hand of God - in heaven - he is also present when we get together in his name.
- Jesus, in heaven, present with us.
- All we need to do is recognise this divine reality, and acknowledge it.
- We just need to ask: Heavenly Father, help us to see your divine reality in our lives, here and now.
- And be intentionally conscious of this.
- Every time we pray, every time we engage with God's word, every time we worship, every time we extend God's love to others, or receive it from others - we are participating in the kingdom of heaven - with the saints.

Purifying ourselves

- The other point of reflection I want to make comes from the second reading, from John's first letter.
- I'll remind you of some of what John wrote:
See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are ... what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3.1,2,3)
- This short passage appears to be referring to a process of change, of transformation - perhaps the transformation that allows for God, or God's presence, to be revealed to us.
- This revelation seems to be the same revealing as the revealing of the kingdom of heaven amongst us.
- And John writes about the hope that we have, of being able to be made more aware of the kingdom of heaven here and now.
- The key phrase here for me is: *all who have this hope in him purify themselves.*
- John is suggesting that our hope is not a passive sitting-around, doing-nothing hope, but an active hope that we act upon.
- And the action that we undertake, or that we participate in, is that of being purified.
- To purify something is to remove everything that is not of its essence.
- So, to purify ourselves - as children of God - is to remove from ourselves everything that is not essentially of God.
- How might we do this?

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- I think that one answer can be found in today's Gospel passage, where Jesus lists the attitudes of the heart that enable us to become purified:

1. *Blessed are the poor in spirit*

- Being poor in spirit means: being open to God, rather than playing God in our lives; acknowledging our needs; being interdependent rather than independent.
- The consequence is that we encounter the kingdom of heaven, now. Acknowledging our poverty of spirit opens the door to a greater awareness of, and a willingness to respond to, God's presence around us.

2. *Blessed are those who mourn*

- Mourning is about: grieving about the pain and injustice in the world and feeling God's pain about how far things are from his purposes; owning the fact that we are part of the problem; refusing to run from pain - whether our own or that of others.
- The consequence of mourning in this way is that we become more dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit, who is our comforter and strengthens us. In the Spirit we find the energy to change things.

3. *Blessed are the meek*

- Meekness means: receiving life as a gift from God rather than grasping at it; devoting ourselves to God's agenda and priorities in a focused and self-disciplined way; being prepared to lay aside our status and privilege in order to empower and enrich others.
- By yielding to God's call and purposes we are enabled to enter into all that God has planned for us.

4. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*

- Hungering and thirsting for righteousness means: aligning our lives with God's priorities and values; longing passionately for the world to be made whole; acting on behalf of others in gentle care and courageous confrontation of evil and injustice.
- The consequence is that we experience deep fulfilment as we seek God's kingdom; we are made for God and nothing less will really satisfy us.

5. *Blessed are the merciful*

- Being merciful means: giving to others the same reckless generosity we receive from God; being willing to forgive others; seeking the best for others, however costly to ourselves, without being either hostile or apathetic to their wrongdoing; overcoming evil with good.
- By demonstrating mercy to others we are then open to receiving the mercy of God and others. If we deal generously, we will receive generously.

6. *Blessed are the pure in heart*

- Being pure in heart means: being sincere in our actions and motives; being honest about self and in relationship to others; seeing into the heart of things, beyond the immediate and obvious; perceiving God's purposes.
- For the pure in heart there is the promise of relationship with God - the ultimate relationship.

7. *Blessed are the peacemakers*

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- Being a peacemaker means: being constructive not destructive; sharing in God's mission to bring wholeness to the world; facing reality and seeking to resolve conflicts; respecting all people, and the earth and its resources.
- By peacemaking we share in God's nature - when we are making peace we are most like God.

8. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*

- Being persecuted for righteousness' sake means: being willing to stand out from the crowd even if this means being thought odd or subversive; speaking or standing up for what is true and right; being prepared to go against the flow.
- Being willing to be identified as a Christian and to pursue righteousness mark a person out as 'of the kingdom of heaven'. Jesus promises blessings for those who embrace this costly call.
- The saints are those who become purified by taking to heart one or more of these attitudes, and acting on them.
- And we celebrate their example to us, even as we worship with them - in the kingdom of heaven, here and now.