
For All the Saints

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 3 November 2024

Isaiah 25:6-9 • Revelation 21:1-6a • Matthew 5:1-12



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today is All Saints' Day and we celebrate the day for itself, as well as for our church here in Prebbleton. It is a time to look back and give thanks for those Prebbletonian pioneers who settled here and built the village and particularly the church. Most of you know the history of the church much better than I do: the land donated by John Tosswill; the first church, really a chapel schoolhouse, built around 1859, and later moved to the Longbeach station, south of Ashburton (I visited Longbeach and went through it years ago, long before I had any association with this parish); the second church, a Benjamin Mountfort design, built in 1871 and burned down in 1906; and this building, built to virtually the same design in 1907. So we are in the 126th year of this building, but our presence here as a

church goes back 164 years. That's quite a long time in NZ — there wasn't much here in the 1850s, and the church held an important place in the town's life.

I admire those who, like those early Prebbleton settlers, had the courage to settle in a new place and to start a new life. I admire them and I'm grateful to them that one of the first things they did was build a church. That was an act of faith, and a living out of the greatest commandment, to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. To build a church — God's house on earth — is to say to the world, we put God first, and we will gather publicly to worship our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a statement that, as John puts it, "we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known" (1 John 3:2). Newly-arrived in this land, the people of Prebbleton built a church. How the town might prosper, or not, was not known to them, but they knew they were children of God. And so they built a church, and although the building has changed, the church — the people of God — still stand.

Jesus speaks in today's Gospel about the things we should aspire to as faithful people. He encourages us to cultivate a loving spirit, one which puts God first and other people before ourselves. To be poor in spirit — to be meek — to be merciful — to hunger for justice. These are the things that set a Christian apart. In the early years following Jesus' crucifixion, as the Good News began to spread, many people were attracted to a faith which preached love for others. Most of the so-called pagan faiths were primarily based on appeasing one or more gods, in order to survive, avoid evil and live a good life. There was very little focus on helping your neighbour. And so when the Gospel came along, and people learned that a God could be loving and wanted the best for all his people, and that service to others was also service to God, it struck a chord with many, and they began to turn to Christ in great numbers. The almost paradoxical idea of loving your neighbour as you love yourself began to supplant the old selfish ways, ways which were based on the supposed nature of selfish and tyrannical gods. A loving God who wanted his people to live simply and in peace was a new idea.

And so Jesus told the crowds that they are blessed, even when they are persecuted and insulted, because he knew that his disciples would be treated badly if they truly followed God's commandments. Yet what Jesus preached was the only way to peace, the only way to bring about the kingdom of heaven.

(To be poor in spirit, incidentally, is not the same as being dispirited, or dull, or lacking in energy. It means to avoid a spirit of selfishness or self-righteousness, and instead, to put others' needs ahead of your own.)

We have a combined celebration at this time of year. Traditionally, All Saints' Day is on the 1st of November, and All Souls' Day on the 2nd. Our lectionary identifies

All Souls' Day as the day when we commemorate the faithful departed. And so we will do in a few minutes, as we read out the names of those we have loved and who have gone before us. It's part of the cycle of the cycle of life, isn't it? And for Christians, remembering the dead takes on a special meaning. We do not believe, as some other faiths do, that the dead control our lives, but the impression they left on us influences us. I've talked often about how my father still influences me — I often find him sitting on my shoulder, as it were, advising me. We remember such people for what they meant to us on earth; but above all we give thanks that they continue to enjoy the best and greatest life of all, eternal life in the presence of God.

Those who have heard and accepted Jesus' words, either directly from him or from his disciples down through the ages — they are those whom we remember today. They are our saints. And their line continues right down through the Prebbles and the others who founded this town and this church, through the ones we will name today and right down to us — and so we carry on the great heritage of faith bequeathed to us, two thousand years old and yet new every day. A very blessed All Saints' day to you all. Amen.