

THE EMMAUS SERIES

All Saints (1st November)

Apocalypse 7:2-4, 9-14

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Happy are the pure in heart: they shall see God

A familiar feast-day, but do we understand its significance in the life of God's Church? God's ultimate plan was to create a family that would share in the boundless love and joy that is the life of the Trinity. The "communion of saints" that is essential to the faith we profess in the Creed each Sunday is the ongoing realisation of that plan. Today we celebrate the reality of that family. Although we have not reached the end of our journey, where we "shall see God as he really is", we already have a genuine fellowship with the Blessed Virgin Mary and all those who have completed the journey, a fellowship that has been an encouragement in the life of the pilgrim Church since the beginning.

What the eternal life we will share with them will be like, of course, is beyond our imagining. It was inevitable, however, that believers should attempt some inadequate description. When he did so, the writer of the Apocalypse was addressing communities threatened with a devastating persecution. In the florid style of the apocalyptic literature common at the time, he assured them that God's promise of a "new heaven and a new earth" for his faithful ones would not be frustrated. His description – with its white robes, palms and prostrations before the throne of God – has provided the image many believers have of heaven. The prophet's image of God's great banquet on the holy mountain is more appealing to most people. But these are only imaginings of what "has not yet been revealed".

The Gospel reading, the Beatitudes with which Matthew opens the Sermon on the Mount, can help us set aside the palms and haloes and think of the saints as friends and fellows who have made the journey before us. This summary of Jesus' teaching gives expression to the heart and spirit of the life to which Jesus calls us. True happiness, Jesus declares, will be found by those for whom their relationship with God means more to them than earthly goods – a "poverty of spirit", a "meekness" and "gentleness" after the example of Jesus, a "hunger for justice" that shapes what we do according to the values of the Kingdom, in sum "a pure (i.e. undivided) heart". These are the ideals that have inspired the saints honoured by the Church, and those countless others known only to God. Today's historical studies make it clear that the saints honoured by the Church have struggled against difficulties of temperament and character; but in the end they gave over to God, as the Holy Spirit taught them the lessons of the Beatitudes. As we make the same journey, let us recognise that we shall take into eternal life hearts that have been shaped by the quality of our response to the challenges of life. Though the hearts of all God's family will be filled with joy, some will be narrow hearts and some will be great and generous hearts.

John Thornhill sm