Prego Plus: Background Notes

All Saints (1 November)

The Solemnity of All Saints

'Celebration': www.johnaugustswanson.com



Today's solemnity of All Saints began in the fifth century as a feast for all known and unknown martyrs, though its focus was later extended to all the saints. Many Christians take opportunity on this day to remember people of inspirational faith and life-giving witness, including those dear to them, believing they are in heaven among the 'unknown' saints. So today's readings emphasise the presence of holy men and women in the Church, seeing them as examples of faithful and joy-filled service for us to emulate. In the words of Pope John Paul II, today's feast 'invites us to turn our gaze to the immense multitude of those who have already reached the blessed land, and points us on the path that will lead us to that destination'. (All Saints Day, 2003)

Psalm 24 (23)

On this feast of All Saints, we are invited to pray the first half of this processional psalm, used by the faithful as they walked towards the Temple in Jerusalem. It starts with an affirmation of God as creator.

The reference to the seas and the waters comes from Canaanite mythology, which held that God divided the waters on the earth both above and under it. A similar image is found in the first account of creation in Genesis 1: 6-8)

The second stanza, written in a question-and-answer format, would probably have been sung antiphonally, with one group asking the questions, and another the answers. It asks who is worthy to enter the Temple, and the answer is a definition of the true faithful: the person who is pure in heart, does not worship other gods and does not harm their neighbour. As a reward for this behaviour, God will ensure their prosperity.

With hindsight, Christians have sometimes recognised Jesus in 'The man with clean hands and pure heart, whose soul is not set on vain things'.

It is particularly appropriate to pray this psalm on All Saints day, when all those who have lived their lives following these precepts will stand in the Lord's 'holy place'.

Gospel Matthew 5: 1–12

The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of the five discourses that form a central part of Matthew's Gospel. The beginning of the Sermon – which we know as 'The Beatitudes' –summarises the values of the Kingdom. Matthew here modifies the first, fourth and ninth Beatitudes included in Luke's 'Sermon on the Plain', though the rest are thought to be his own composition.

Jesus sits down to teach

This is a significant detail. When a Jewish Rabbi was teaching officially, he sat down. In the same way, when Matthew uses the word 'taught', he uses a past tense, which in Greek means that Jesus's teaching was repeated and habitual. The Sermon on the Mount was not one sermon, but the essence of all that Jesus taught throughout his ministry.

The Beatitudes

'Beatitude' comes from the Latin *beatus*, meaning blessed or happy. The word used by Matthew himself comes from the Greek *makarios*, which specially describes the gods, so there is a godlike joy in the people he is describing. This quality is something they already have, rather than something they hope to achieve in the future. Jesus is saying that there is great joy in living out the values of the Kingdom, even though these are values the world finds difficult to accept and understand.

Matthew was writing for a Jewish-Christian audience, and those in his community lived by edicts and rules of the Jewish Law. The Beatitudes point to an awareness of spiritual need, humility, peaceful and moral living, and compassion as the keys to happiness. Most of all, Matthew's Beatitudes see Christian witness as the core of a happy life.

St Beuno's Outreach
In the Diocese of Wrexham