Matthew 5.1-12, Revelation 7.9-17

SERMON

It's been a week of saints and sinners – and I'm not just talking about the budget. Halloween was yesterday when people celebrate or mock the darkness and the scary things of life, from ghosts to ghouls for horror to the macabre. Halloween of course comes from the conjunction of the 'eve of all hallows', the eve of all saints day, which we celebrate today.

From celebrating the dark, to celebrating the light and those who bring the light to our lives.

'At school today we learnt about saints,' said Beth. 'Really?' said Gran. 'So, what makes someone a saint?' Beth thought hard, looking about her for inspiration. Then she noticed that they were just passing the church, and her eyes lit up. 'Saints are people who the light shines through,' she said. 'What do you mean?' asked Gran. Beth led Gran into the church and pointed up at the windows. One window showed the nativity, another showed St James, another the four Gospel writers. The newest window was a depiction of the local congregation, with the evening sun shining through them, refracting colours of light around the building. Saints are people who the light shines through.

The Prince of Wales has said awarding a knighthood to rugby league star Sir Kevin Sinfield "was probably the easiest decision anyone's ever had to make".

Sir Kevin recently completed **seven ultra marathons in seven days**.

It was his latest endurance challenge to raise money for Motor Neurone Disease (MND) charities following the death of his friend and former team-mate, Rob Burrow, **from the condition in 2024.**

"I think frankly he should have been Sir Kevin years ago," said Prince William.

"What Kevin does, is he can bind and glue communities together by being that leader. The more Kevs we have in this country the better."

Sir Kevin Sinfield was made a knight bachelor by the Prince of Wales at Windsor Castle the other week October 2026

"He's a top bloke, really nice guy, good, honest, kind, decent northerner and I love that about Kevin, that there is no ego with him. He is what you get."

Rob Burrow's MND diagnosis changed a relationship between team-mates into a public campaign to raise awareness.

Sir Kevin supported Rob and his family through the difficult progression of the disease, becoming an important fundraiser for the MND community.

"That lack of ego is really important in a world that everyone wants to show how amazing they all are... Kevin does it very quietly very subtly," explained the prince.

Sir Kevin... Saint Kevin? Are those the qualities for sainthood: top bloke, really nice guy, good, honest, kind, decent?

"All Saints Day, celebrated on 1 November, is a time in the Christian calendar when we remember and give thanks for the lives and witness of those who have gone before us in faith. While some Christian traditions place particular emphasis on officially recognised saints, the Protestant understanding celebrates the “communion of saints” as the whole community of God's people, past and present. ... All Saints Day invites us to remember with gratitude those whose faith, love, courage and compassion have helped shape our own journeys ... As we give thanks for those who have walked before us, we are encouraged to continue their witness, living God's love in our own time and place."

John has a vision of a heavenly place that shows many people worshipping God. There are people from every nation, tribe, people group and language, and they worship day and night. It is an inclusive vision.

The book of Revelation is always known as a tricky book in the Bible. Apocalyptic writings revealed something previously hidden. They helped people to understand things in a new way. They aimed to look at events on earth from the perspective of God and of the end of history, demonstrating the connection between what happens on earth and what is happening in heaven.

Against a backdrop of persecution and suffering in the Early Church, Revelation aimed to give hope, especially the hope that God would ultimately intervene to bring in a new

age when God's rule would be full and unchallenged. Yet many of its visons are violent and vengeful. I guess if you were one of the first Christians being thrown to the lions or set alight as a Roman Candle in first century Rome, you may have wanted to exact some revenge. Yet it doesn't sit well for those who allegedly follow the Prince of Peace who loved his enemies.

Apocalyptic writings are full of symbolism, perhaps to make it difficult for persecutors to understand the messages and hope being conveyed. It also makes it difficult for us to interpret them and allows some people to give fantastic predictions about what will happen in the future.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that only a literal 144,000 people will go to heaven.

According to their theology based on the Book of Revelation (Chapters 7 and 14), this group is known as the **"anointed class"** or **"little flock"**. They are resurrected as immortal spirit creatures to serve as kings and priests alongside Jesus Christ for 1,000 years, forming an invisible heavenly government.

Individuals who identify as part of the 144,000 signify this calling by partaking of the bread and wine at the annual Memorial of Christ's death. Can you imagine its Good Friday and you are in the Kingdom Hall for JWs and they pass the bread and wine round. Only if you think you are one of the 144,000 can you eat and drink of it. Who would be confident enough or arrogant enough to take a sip and a piece of bread?

What happens to everyone else?

Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that everyone else perishes. Instead, they teach that the vast majority of faithful people (referred to as the "great crowd" or "other sheep") have an **earthly hope**: After Armageddon, they will live forever in a perfected, physical paradise on Earth, governed from heaven by Jesus and the 144,000.

Back in the day when these churches were built the Victorians were obsessed about death and especially the question who was going to heaven. When you die you will meet with God – what will God do with you? Heaven and hell was preached from these pulpits.

I don’t sense those are people’s questions and fears and worries today. Perhaps we experience heaven today in our living standards, we have had a good life, not worried about what happens when we die.

Perhaps we have our fingers crossed that there won’t be God, that there won’t be anything after death. So it won’t matter if we have ignored God for most of our lives. We won’t be answerable for anything we have done or not done in this life.

And yet people also demand justice, hope for a righting of wrongs, so long as it doesn’t involve them.

There’s a poem about popping into church

now and again to edge your bets:

For why do I bother? It’s not out of grace,
It’s strictly so God doesn’t blank on my face.
When judgment day comes and I’m carried in feet first,
And St. Peter’s checking the best and the least worst,

I want the Almighty to lean out and say,
"Oh yeah, that’s the guy who showed up that one day!
He sat in row twelve by the broken-down fan—
Quick, open the gates for that diligent man!"

So call it pure strategy, call it a ploy,
A Sunday attendance of moderate joy;
Just stamp my big card with a heavenly glow,
So God says, *"I know him. Come on in. Let's go."*

The picture in the New Testament and here in the Book of Revelation is that those in heaven are the saints – saints not necessarily because they have lived blameless or upright lives, but saints because they have accepted the grace of God in Jesus and have stayed faithful. Yet it is also an inclusive vision.

The first vision (7: 1- 8) is a smaller number from Israel, the 144,000. The second from all the nations. They carry palm branches as a sign of victory and sing of salvation. The

Hebrew word for salvation, which the writer would have known despite using Greek, has connotations of welfare, deliverance, salvation and victory. The dialogue makes clear these are those who came through persecution and tribulation; their cleansing from being soiled to being holy is through Jesus' sacrificial death. The allusion is to repentance, conversion, baptism which, together, both indicate and give effect to a person's transformation. Perseverance might mean death, but the passage does not say this is the way for all Christians. The last verses of the passage show the emotional and physical healing that comes from salvation and living in God's presence.

This is no chore to pop into church every now and again. This is drinking from the springs of living water. This is knowing the Good Shepherd, this is about living in the knowledge of God's presence and love despite what the world is doing to you.

This is knowing grace in your life. That unconditional acceptance, unconditional love. You don't deserve it, you can't earn it, but if you have experienced it is life transforming. You feel blessed – whatever your circumstances.

But it also an inclusive vision. The multitude includes Jews and all who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and thereby have identified with the way of the Lamb. Witnessing against the Beast – the domination of the empire and the ungodly powers that can bring exploitation and injustice and instead espousing the way of the Lamb, sacrificial love and service and love for all, means inclusion in this great multitude.

All saints means that. All saints.

Maybe many who have never named the name of Jesus but who lived lives that continued in the way of the Lamb. It sounds like a contradiction in verse 14: *these are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*.

Making robes white in the blood of the Lamb. The blood of Jesus being spilt in the cause of love, forgiveness, justice, resistance. Being prepared to face discrimination and hatred sin and evil and giving back love.

They have opposed the Imperial Roman ruling to worship the Emperor and Roman Gods, instead taking on themselves the Christlike values of the Beatitudes, an upside

down version of reality, where instead of the value of power, domination, arrogance and wealth; humility, peace-making and justice-seeking are valued and worthy.

We may not be persecuted here because of our faith but many around the world still are.

I read the stories of numerous modern day martyrs for the faith in preparation for this sermon.

Gladys Staines (born c. 1951) is the widow of Australian missionary Graham Staines. Graham Staines was burnt alive along with their two sons Philip (aged 10) and Timothy (aged 7) by a mob of Hindu militants in January 1999.[i]

Shortly after the sentencing of the killers, Staines issued a statement saying that she had forgiven the killers and had no bitterness towards them.[4] Rather than return to Australia, Staines "decided to stay in India where she and her husband had served lepers for 15 years", keeping her daughter Esther, with her, stating: "I cannot just leave those people who love and trust us. I have high regard for the people of India and their tolerance."[5] Staines transformed the leper house she served at into a full hospital.[8] The hospital is named Graham Staines Memorial Hospital, established in 2004.

Asia Bibi was dragged out of her house in Pakistan, beaten, and arrested in front of an angry mob.[ii]
Asia is a Christian. In Pakistan, many conservative Muslims don't like to eat or drink with people of other faiths. They believe that non-Muslims are impure.

Asia's co-workers told her that she was "dirty" and not worthy of drinking from the same cup as them. An argument erupted and fierce words were exchanged on both sides.

Five days later, the police barged their way into Asia's house and accused her of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Outside was a mob, including the village cleric who had accused her of blasphemy. Asia was dragged outside.

The mob brazenly began to beat her, right in front of the police. She was arrested and charged with blasphemy.

During the trial Asia maintained her innocence, but in 2010 she was sentenced to death. She has spent the past nine years of her life in solitary confinement.

Eventually, with a lot of Western pressure the charge was dropped and Asia Bibi was allowed to go free and given asylum in Canada.

You can still be executed for the charge of blasphemy in Pakistan.

We may not be persecuted for our faith. But we all have troubles from time to time and worry for our planet, for our politicians, for the challenging economic situation in our world. This weeks budget may not have brought much relief to many who are struggling.

Let us, if we can, join together ready to give thanks for the blessings we do have and offer our worship with praise and joy, knowing that Jesus is our Lord and Saviour. And stay faith to the way of Jesus bringing light in the darkness.

My wife and I had a trip out to Leeds this week to see the light up Leeds festival. There was a lot of public free light installations around the city centre, lighting up famous public buildings, visual installations in places like Leeds minster and the library and dances and drummers all using lighting effects. It was a celebration of the light, which was a welcome contrast with all the festivities for Halloween.

Its not that Halloween asks the wrong questions or is harmful. But that it sells our children short. Our children deserve better. Indeed, we all deserve better than fear without hope, darkness without dawn and death without resurrection.

To all the saints, may the Good Shepherd lead you to springs of living water.

Affirmation of Faith from Revd Andy Braunston **https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/prayer-and-worship/worship-notes/**

Our culture tells us of blessed billionaires but Jesus says:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Our culture distracts us from inequality, injustice, racism and poverty but Jesus says:

"Blessed are those who mourn for how things are, for they will be comforted."

Our culture valorises the strong and powerful, but Jesus says:

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Our culture tells us that things are complex, that little can really change, but Jesus says:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

Our culture screams for ever more draconian responses

to crime and countries we don’t like, but Jesus says:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

Our culture titillates, and glamorises the young and the attractive,

seeking to sell pleasure, but Jesus says:

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Our culture is addicted to war, but Jesus says:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Our culture despises migrants who flee war and want,

poverty and persecution, but Jesus says:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Our culture demands that we are liked

and seek validation on social media but Jesus says:

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you…on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

And so, with the great multitude that no one can count,

from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,

who stand before the throne of God, we cry out in loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God!"

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[i] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gladys_Staines
[ii] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Asia_Bibi