

A Sermon by Canon Maggie

All Saints' Day 2020.

1 John 3.1-3

Matthew 5.2-16

God's children now

'Beloved, we are God's children now; 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.' (1 John 3.2)

One of the things I love about the New Testament is how varied it is – what different voices we hear in the different books – and yet how unified those voices are on its most fundamental truths.

The author of the First Letter of John is clearly the same person as the author of the Fourth Gospel, called by us the 'Gospel of John'. Whether this person was John the Galilean fisherman, one of the Twelve, is perhaps dubious – though some people think it was he, writing in much later life, after many years of reflection. But the identity of the author doesn't really matter. What does matter is the quality of reflection in both the Gospel of John, and in the letters which bear his name. In the Gospel named as John's, we have the teachings *of* Jesus and *about* Jesus which are obviously related to what's in the first three Gospels, but which seem to have been reflected upon, and plumbed to the depths of their meaning, through a process of prolonged meditation. The same reflective voice speaks to the church in the Letters of John.

And so here we have today words about being children of God, seeing him and being like him when we do – words too about purity: *'All who have this hope... purify themselves just as he is pure'* (1 John 3.3)...

Set these words alongside the well-known passage called the Beatitudes from St Matthew's Gospel, and you get the feeling that John the author is playing a meditative variation in his letter on what's said there – words about being children of God (*'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God'...Matt.5.9*), words about purity and seeing God (*'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God'...Matt.5.8*). What I think this shows is that we shouldn't get too hung-up when we read or hear the Beatitudes on any sense of exact equivalence between each declaration of blessedness and the promise attached to it. John doesn't seem to worry about it. I think he's saying to us 'don't say that it's just people with the gift of peace-making that will be called children of God – all Christian disciples are his children, born of him through water and the Spirit and the gift of faith. Don't beat yourself up with the thought that you are very far from pure in heart, and so the hope of seeing God is denied to you. Think of it this way – as God's children you do have the hope of seeing him at the end – and it's living actively in this hope which will purify your heart as you grow.'

What Jesus' Beatitudes are in St Matthew's Gospel is a rounded portrait of the Christian life – a life into which we are growing from the moment we make our Baptism our own through faith, a life which is full of hope.

Although St Matthew's Gospel portrays Jesus as going up a mountain to give this teaching, rather like a new Moses bringing down some new commandments to a new Israel, this teaching is not Law in the sense of a set of things which have to be achieved in order to inherit the promises. (The Old Law was not supposed to be like that, either - but that's a subject for another day.) Rather, Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes is a statement of confidence in all those who have set out on the road of following him – and maybe of confidence, too, in others who do not consciously know they are following him, but who have also set out on the road of poverty of spirit which does not claim too much for itself, the road of that grief which makes the

suffering of the world its own – the road of meekness and mercy, of hunger for justice and single-mindedness or pure heartedness in the pursuit of truth and goodness – the road of all those who build peace between people and are ready to suffer for the right. When Jesus spoke the Beatitudes to his rag-tag set of disciples in Galilee, he already saw in them the potential in God's grace to carry the message and reality of God's reign into the world. Blessed, blessed are these people – blessed are *you* – however far you still have to travel, for you travel with God's grace, and in the hope he puts in your heart. The state of being blessed is *now* – not in some far distant future when you will have achieved it all and earned your reward. *'Beloved, we are God's children now'*, as John puts it, and yet *'what we will be has not yet been revealed'*. So, with the blessedness of being God's children now, we still have hope of even more to come, although it's beyond description: *'What we do know is this: when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.'* (1 John 3.2b).

I do love this promise that we shall see God; it was what the psalmist yearned for as he sang about the wonder of seeing God in his temple: (*'One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.'* Psalm 27.4)

The hope of seeing God in the end is the climax St Paul's wonderful hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13.12: *'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.'*

All these different strands of the Bible point to this wonderful hope, along with Jesus in the Beatitudes – and all of them suggest that seeing God will admit us to a reality beyond our understanding.

But we are God's children *now*, nonetheless. We are children on the road, the people of 'the Way', as the first Christians were originally known.

What has all this to do with today, All Saints' Day?

Simply that Christians sometimes get unnecessarily hung- up on who is a saint. Is it someone in whom a certain completion of holiness is seen – someone who has advanced along the road, far ahead of us, but who inspires us and beckons us on by their example? Or are we *all* the 'saints' of God, as some of the New Testament Epistles imply, however incomplete, faulty and faltering our discipleship?

Perhaps our reflection today – our meditation on Jesus' Beatitudes in the company of John – tells us that both these ideas are true. There is a vision – a vision of God which will transform us – to which we are called and for which we can hope in the future. Living in this hope will itself begin and foster our transformation, the purification of our hearts. But it's a process – we may be very much at the beginning of it. And yet we are blessed ones now, children of God, 'people of the Way' – disciples *on* the way. Jesus has seen and pronounced our potential. In many people further down the road we can see more clearly what holiness – sanctity – means. In that sense, they are 'the saints', and we can rejoice not only in their example, but in their encouragement of us from heaven. We are bound into one community with them, and they cheer us on our way. For sanctity has already touched us too, however imperfect we are. In this sense, we are also the saints of God. And all those we have loved, who have gone before, in whom we have seen reflections of God's goodness – they are saints, too. This is a day which celebrates us all, and our enduring unity in Christ.

So, let me end with a prayer, remembering our departed saints:
Father in heaven,
we thank you for those whom we love and remember
today,
and what they each meant to each of us.
We bless you that in bearing your image
they brought light to our lives;
for we have seen
in their friendship reflections of your compassion,
in their integrity demonstrations of your goodness,
in their faithfulness glimpses of your eternal love.
Grant to each of us, beloved and bereft,
the grace to follow their good examples
so that we with them may come to your everlasting kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Maggie Guite