

# All Saints, and just in time ...

Sermon for All Saints' Day

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Revelations 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

+In the Name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

In *The New York Review of Books* this week, the American essayist and playwright Wallace Shawn cast his mind back over seventy years and asked how things had changed in his country. It's not that America was ever as pure and righteous as it likes to think, he concluded; it's just that now, people have stopped pretending. His comments refer to the Gospel passage for this All Saints' Day, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, so I'm going to quote him at length. Here's some of what Wallace Shawn had to say.

Trump has liberated a lot of people from the last vestiges of the Sermon on the Mount. A lot of people turn out to have been sick and tired of pretending to be good. The fact that the leader of one of our two parties—the party, in fact, that has for many decades

represented what was normal, acceptable, and respectable—was not ashamed to reveal his own selfishness, was not ashamed to reveal his own indifference to the suffering of others, was not even ashamed to reveal his own cheerful enjoyment of cruelty...all of this helped people to feel that they no longer needed to be ashamed of those qualities in themselves either. They didn't need to feel bad because they didn't care about other people. Maybe they didn't want to be forbearing toward enemies. Maybe they didn't want to be gentle or kind.

In a world in which the rich want permission to take as much as they can get without feeling any shame, and many of the not-rich are so worried about their own sinking fortunes that they find it hard to worry about the misery of anyone else, Trump is the priest who grants absolution. In a way, he seems to be telling his followers that perhaps compassion is just one more value of the elite culture that he and they hate, like speaking in long sentences and listening to classical music.

So says Wallace Shawn. Now, it's a sobering fact that many conservative Christians in America, both Catholic and Protestant, share in this new culture of weaponized grievance, contempt and spitefulness. Jesus' vision in today's

Gospel is notably absent when no credit is given to meekness or mercy or peacemaking, while perverse, self-justifying versions of purity and righteousness are gaining ground.

Jesus knew what his saints would have to face, however. He tells us in today's Gospel that the saints are going to be persecuted and spoken evil of because they refuse to play by the familiar rules. Likewise, our Revelations reading today identifies the blessed in heaven as those who've come out of a great ordeal. And here's why the lamb is such a powerful symbol in that reading—paradoxically, this mildest of creatures, and everywhere slain, is now the central Christian image of Jesus' own triumph, and that of his saints, because it's a triumph of mercy and peace, not of violence and wrathful payback. William Blake distinguished the lamb from a fierce predator in his great poem "The Tyger", but here it's the lamb of God that we see burning bright in the forest of the night, with a fearful symmetry spelling not predation but salvation, not death but life.

Friends, Jesus' teaching in our Gospel today isn't best understood as *prescriptive*, telling us what to do but, rather,

as *descriptive*, telling us what the saints are and have always been doing—and why, and how. Because this alternative, paradoxical triumph of love in the midst of death and defeat *is* playing out in history. Because God *is* crafting a miracle of genuine, life-giving purity and righteousness from the warped timber of actual human existence. Today's Gospel isn't an *aspiration*, then—it's an *observation*! And what we observe is God's craftsmanship at work in ordinary lives, even yours and mine.

The temptation of course is to distance ourselves from the saints, perhaps to put them on a pedestal, contenting ourselves with a few half-hearted gestures in the direction of holiness. But today's epistle from 1 John makes clear that sanctity is not alien; that you and I are among the saints already, in the sense of being God's children *now*, and on a journey to becoming something that we can't imagine. Instead of a half-lived Christian life, then, which is all that many Christians aspire to, the final revelation of our identity is imagined here as oneness with God, so that in the

meantime we have every reason to purify ourselves as God is pure—to start living out our truest destiny here and now.

Fr Martin properly warned us last week about the dangers of purity—purity of the wrong sort, that is—so here I commend Søren Kierkegaard’s reliable definition: purity of heart is to will one thing. Now, this doesn’t mean that there’s only one way to be a saint, because in truth there are lots, as our Revelations reading today imagines it: a heaven of diverse, multinational, multilingual, transhistorical humanity, faithful no doubt in so many ways, having answered the demands and lived under the conditions of many different ages. A favourite All Saints’ hymn captures this diversity of ways in which the saints exhibit this single purity:

Some march with events to turn them God’s way.

Some need to withdraw, the better to pray.

Some carry the Gospel through fire and through  
flood—

the world is their parish; their purpose is God.

Now, friends, there's a glory in this that's meant to lift up our hearts. And here in the Eucharist that lifting up of our hearts is meant to take place—lifted up into God's holiness; lifted beyond the world of ugly self-assertion, contempt and hatred that batters on the doors of our imagination. Instead, here today we participate in the vision of our Revelations reading, which imagines heaven as a great Eucharistic celebration, with martyred saints and angels and other heavenly powers gathered around the throne and the lamb of God—just as a company of the newly baptised would have gathered around their bishop, robed in white, for the Easter Eucharist.

And, so, friends, I invite you to compare what we're doing here today with a Trump rally—with its celebration of vindictiveness and contempt; with the fleeting relief it offers from an eroded self-image. Friends, Christians can do better than that, and with that in mind it helps us to remember that we belong among God's saints *already*, straining upwards with them in the high calling of humility, mercy and peacemaking; welcomed into a purity and righteousness that doesn't have to be asserted at others' expense. Because the

world needs its saints—it needs them to step up, and now!  
Otherwise the alternative is just too awful.

The Lord be with you ...