Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
All Saints' Day – Year A

RCL Readings – Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
ACNA Readings – Ecclesiasticus 44:1-14; Psalm 149; Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction. This introduction will highlight the background and theology behind *All Saints' Day*. All Saints' Day – and All Souls' Day following – remind us that, as a disciple of Jesus Messiah, we are not solitary. In the world, there has been a massive shift towards a culture of individualism and self-centredness. All Saints' Day is counter-cultural, giving us an inspiring vision of the innumerable company of *saints* of which we are a part – a mutual belonging that even transcends death! We think especially of our connectedness to past saints and find inspiration in their stories of God's faithfulness. It's as if they whisper to us: "His grace was sufficient for me in my trials, and it is sufficient for you today."

This day recalls those individuals down the history of the church in whom we have seen the grace of God powerfully at work – to be encouraged by their example and to be reminded that sanctity may grow in the ordinary circumstances and even in the extraordinary crises of life. We also recognise that the words *holy ones* in the Hebrew scriptures and the word *saints* in the New Testament are used to speak of every true believer in God. So, on this day, we can be encouraged to thank God for all those saints who have been a blessing and influence in our own lives – and those who may have led us to faith in God – and let the memory of their faith stimulate us to deeper worship and greater service in the Lord.

However, while we remember past saints on All Saints' Sunday, we should not lose sight of the fact that the festival is ultimately a celebration of Christ's victory over death. As the Church of England website says: "Redemption is a work of God's grace; it is God who redeems us in Christ and there is nothing to be done beyond what Christ has done. But we still wait for the final consummation of God's new creation in Christ; those who are Christ's, whether or not they have passed through death, join in prayer [with all the saints down the ages] that God's kingdom will be revealed finally and in all its fullness."

It is customary in traditional churches to sing the hymn by Walsham How: For all the saints, who from their labours rest. The usual tune by Ralph Vaughan Williams is rousing and triumphant in keeping with the lyrics, but the lyrics from 1864 need careful reading. Read them slowly and carefully and with reflexivity, and let them inspire you afresh. And maybe these three verses in particular, and in the context of the current global challenges:

> *O blest communion, fellowship divine!*
> *We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;*
> *All are one in Thee, for all are Thine.*
> *Alleluia, Alleluia!*

O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
And win with them the victor's crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave, again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

So, today, we celebrate our "blest communion, fellowship divine" with the saints down the ages, and now in heaven – called *the Church Triumphant* – and we fight like them as God's people today, even "when the strife is fierce, the warfare long" – *the Church Militant*.

Common Theme. The theme in our readings recognises our mutual belonging with the saints down the ages and inspires us to live like them. Our reading from Revelation gives us a vision of the throne room of God and the Lamb with an enormous crowd that no one can count made up of persons from every nation, tribe, people, and language praising God for his salvation. Our Psalm gives one man's testimony of God's deliverance and calls all the saints – Yahweh's servants – to join him in thanksgiving and praise. John's epistle bursts into eulogy over the fact that the Father has made not only holy ones but also *children of God*, and the Beatitudes in our Gospel reading dramatically set out the blessings and behaviours of the saints in God's new covenant: "Oh the blessednesses of the ones who."

Revelation 7:9-17. What a beautiful vision of heaven to fill our minds on All Saints' Day! An enormous crowd that no one can count – made up of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language – standing before the throne and before the Lamb, dressed in long white robes with palm branches in their hands, and shouting out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb" (v. 10).

John obviously understands *the Lamb* here as the crucified Messiah of the Tanakh, in risen, heavenly form. And the sanctified ones in long white robes are like priests, servants before the heavenly throne, within the heavenly temple. And such an ecumenical image of heaven here – people of every tribe are included in the kingdom and priesthood. The promise to Israel in Exodus 19:6 has been democratised to all God's people (see also 1 Pet 2:9, JANT). Beale adds: "The vision of a great multitude evokes the promise to Abraham and Jacob's descendants which cannot be numbered for multitude (esp. Gen 16:10; 32:12, also Gen 13:16; 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; Hos 1:10; Heb 11:12). This promise to Israel is here applied to the church from all nations."

Beale gives further understanding by showing the connection of the palm branches to the Festival of Tabernacles:

> This [festival] reminded them that their continued existence as a nation was traceable ultimately to God's redemption at the Red Sea and victory over the Egyptians (in 1 Macc. 13:51 and included in 2 Macc 10.7, palm branches signify victory over an enemy; likewise Philo refers to a palm tree as a symbol of victory). The same imagery is now applied by John to people from all nations, who rejoice in their latter-day exodus redemption, in their victory over their persecutors, and in the fact that God has protected them subsequently during their wilderness pilgrimage (cf. 12:6, 14) through the 'great tribulation.'

The words of praise in verse ten in some English versions may appear strange to us: "Salvation to our God." It comes from the idea in the Hebrew word *salvation* (*yeshua*) – including deliverance and victory. So the multitude are worshipping God here, saying the salvation victory belongs to him and him alone!

The term *the great tribulation* also occurs in Matthew 24:21, where there is explicit reference to Daniel 12:1. Beale says: "The tribulation in Daniel consists of the eschatological opponent persecuting the saints because of their covenant loyalty to God (see Dan 11:30-39, 44; 12:10). Some will apostatize and also persecute those remaining loyal, especially by attempting to cause the faithful to forsake their loyalty (Dan 11:32, 34; 12:10). In John's view, this tribulation has already begun."

Stern says that the metaphor of washed robes white in the blood of the Lamb "only gains power from being contradictory when taken literally" and "means that those who did not capitulate under persecution have become clean and are regarded by God as sinless (compare Isaiah 1:18) because they have remained faithful to Yeshua, who shed his blood for them (1:7)."

The saints here are envisioned as being in God's heavenly temple and literally where God "tabernacles over them." This clearly alludes to Ezekiel's prophecy of Israel's revival (Ezek 37:26-28 LXX), where God says: "I will establish my sanctuary in the midst of them forever. And my tabernacle [kataskēnōsis] shall be over them … when my sanctuary is in the midst of them forever." (Also see Rev 21:3-6). Yet again, these innumerable saints are viewed as the fulfilment of a prophecy. And further, John refers to Isaiah 49:9-10, saying, "They shall not hunger, neither shall they thirst; neither shall the heat nor the sun smite them … and by fountains of water shall he lead them" (cf. John 6:35). Beale says: "The 'living waters,' which picture eternal life, have their origin in God and the Lamb (so 21:6; 22:1, 17). In contrast, 1QHaXVI, 4-10 identifies the Teacher of Righteousness from Qumran as the fount of living waters from which the saints should drink)." And the image of the Lamb "shepherding them" recalls not only Isa 49 but also Ps 23, so Christ's shepherding role here confirms his position as a divine figure. And of course, the Lamb can only be "at the centre of the throne" because he is a member of the Godhead.

Also, the beautiful words of Isa 25:8 are added: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." And the reason there will no longer be any weeping is given there: God "will swallow up death for all time."

Psalm 34:1-10, 22. This is a psalm of thanksgiving from one individual rather than from an enormous crowd, but in his praise to God for his salvation from distress, he actively encourages other worshippers to join him in the same.

It is an acrostic psalm, beginning each verse with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet (vv. 1 to 21 commence with the 22 letters of the alphabet, except for the sixth letter (*vav*, ו) which is omitted, though it does start the second half of v. 5, and v. 6 starts with the seventh letter (zayin, ז). Also, the last verse, verse 22 starts with a repeat of the 17th letter – *peh* (פ). Peh is often used to end a main section of text in the Tanakh, so maybe it was used to indicate the closing verse of the psalm (see also Ps 25). So Alter comments: "The psalm ends, as does the acrostic in Psalm 25, with a wrap-up verse that begins with the verb padah, 'redeem.'"

The psalm heading refers to the account in 1 Samuel 21:10-15; it tells the story of how David tried to find refuge from Saul in Gath. Perhaps the name *Abimelech* in the heading was a royal title for the king of Gath, rather than a proper name (NET). Fearful that the king might hand him over or kill him, he pretended to be insane. The king apparently sent David away as Gath had its own share of those who suffered similarly!

The titles were later additions, appearing to align the psalm with incidents in the life of David. Alter asks:

> Why did the editor detect a link between our psalm and this incident in the David story? In all likelihood, the connection he saw was the psalm's emphasis on God's rescuing power, even when the just man is threatened with immediate death by his enemies. Particularly pertinent are the lines near the end of the poem: "many the evils of the righteous man, yet from all of them the LORD will save him. He guards all his bones, not a single one is broken." And perhaps the image in 1 Samuel 21 of the future king of Israel scabbling on the doors and drooling over his beard may have been called to the editor's mind by "Near is the LORD to the broken-hearted, and the crushed in spirit he rescues."

The psalm shows that from low points such as this – of depression and shame – it is possible for his holy ones to rise up and praise the LORD. The verb form opening the psalm expresses an appeal to *the will* – that is, it is in the volitional mood – meaning here, "I will bless the LORD at all times, in every circumstance."

Notice the parallelism in the four lines which adds strength to the appeal:

v.2a	I **will** bless	YHWH	**in all times** (on every occasion),
v.2b	**Continually**, his praise (will be)		*in my mouth.*
v.3a	In YHWH	*my soul*	will boast,
v.3b	Let the humble/oppressed		hear and rejoice.

It shows the commitment – continually and at all times – to bless and praise the LORD (vv. 2a and 2b), and also for it to be integral to one's being, "in my mouth" and "my soul" (vv. 2b; 3a). This then leads the psalmist to call the weak, poor, and oppressed – those wholly dependent on God alone – to hear this praise and so to rejoice in the same delivering God (v. 3b). He goes on to call them to "magnify the LORD with him" and so declares "we will exalt his name together."

He reverts back in verse four to personal testimony: "I sought the LORD and he helped me and delivered me from all my fears" and then appeals again to the oppressed based on his testimony: "Look to him and be radiant / do not let your faces be ashamed."

And then he turns again to his own testimony; this oppressed/poor man cried out, and the LORD heard and saved him from all his troubles. He knew what it was to go through affliction and oppression, so is able to call all similar to follow his example and to benefit from his experience.

The angel of the LORD camps round the ones who fear the LORD and delivers them. This reference to the angel of the LORD guiding and protecting God's people occurs a number of times (see also Gen 24:40).

And once again the psalmist reverts to appeal – taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh the happinesses or blessednesses (plural) of the one who takes refuge in him. Alter comments on the word taste:

> The sensory concreteness of the verb is somewhat startling, perhaps intended to suggest the powerful immediacy of experiencing God's beneficence. It also probably puns on the same root used as a noun in the superscription with the meaning 'good sense.' If the pun is significant, 'tasting' may also mean using good sense." NET also says: "This verb is normally used of tasting food, as in eating a little bit of food (1 Sam 14:43; Jonah 3:7) or evaluating it (Job 12:11; 34:3). The two references to the physical senses stand for invitation and realization. Even a small or beginning experience of God reveals that he is good (NET, note 14).

Verse nine particularly resonates with All Saints' Day, by referencing *his holy ones* in the Hebrew: "Fear the LORD, his holy ones …." Alter considers there is a smoothness to the formulation of verses 11-12 and adds: "All this gives this psalm a measured choreographed dignity (it is not surprising that this text has been incorporated into the sabbath morning liturgy)."

1 John 3:1-3. This reading is really a parenthesis in the wider context, prompted by the words in 2:29 about being "begotten" or fathered by God. John bursts out with a eulogy: "Behold what sort of love the Father (who has begotten us, 2:29) has given to us!" The *sort of love* is proved by the fact that we are now called children of God! And this is driven home by the last simple clause "and we are." This has the sense of "and indeed we are (children of God)," – such an amazing truth to absorb! And John explains that the world is blind to this fact, but we should not be surprised that they don't recognise us as children of God, because they did not recognise Yeshua as Messiah either, as John stated in the opening of his Gospel (John 1:10).

The NET explains there is a potential ambiguity in the text of verse two regarding what has been revealed (n. 10). The subject of the verb *revealed* is third person masculine, but this could be translated *he* or *it*. If it is translated as *he* then it refers to Jesus being revealed at his second advent – the Parousia. But if taken as *it*, then it refers to the clause "what we shall be" at the beginning of the sentence. NET says: "In the context this makes good sense: 'Beloved, now we are children of God, and what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We know that whenever it shall be revealed, we shall be like him, because we shall see him just as he is.' This emphasises the contrast in the verse between the present state ('not yet been revealed') and the future state ('shall be revealed') of believers, and this will of course take place at the parousia." What an amazing promise, that all followers of Messiah Yeshua will become like him when he appears at the Parousia! (See 2:28)

And what is the cause of our transformation? John explains: "We shall be like him because we will see him just as he is." The sight of our Saviour will be transformational – we will be changed to be like him forever! But, of course, this, in a lesser degree, is true even now. Every glimpse we get of the Lord's glory, through his Word and by his Spirit, changes us into his image, from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18)! This is confirmed in verse three, that everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure. The verb for *purifies* here is unusual (ἁγνίζω, *hagnizō*), as it only occurs here and in John 11:55. There it describes the Passover purification (also in Exod 19:10-11; Num 8:12 LXX). This points us again to the roots of our faith; if we have this hope of seeing Jesus as he is, then we should be preparing now – living a purified life just as Jesus did when he was here on earth.

Matthew 5:1-12. This passage is always read on All Saints' Day, as it dramatically sets out the blessings and rewards of the saints in God's new covenant community. It is like a divine constitution for the Community of Saints! It is presented at the commencement of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), and we are told that, with the crowd around him, Jesus goes up a mountain – reminiscent of Moses (e.g., Exod 19:3 and 24:12). JANT points out some of the resonances with Moses in the life of Jesus: "Like Moses, Jesus escapes death, enters Egypt, enters the water, goes into the wilderness, and ascends a mountain."

Beale adds:

> The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five major blocks of sermonic material that distinctively punctuate Matthew's narrative (along with chaps. 10; 13; 18; 23-25). These discourses have often been likened to the five books of Torah … This motif calls to mind Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai. But labels of Jesus as a 'new Moses' must be at least as sensitive to the discontinuities between the two covenant makers as to the continuities. Some wrongly see Matthew's Gospel as promoting a much more law-observant form of Christianity than his canonical companions (p. 20).

Beatitude comes from the Latin *beatus*, meaning *blessed*. The Greek word *makarioi* here occurs 68 times in the LXX and means *happy are* or *blessed are.* The Hebrew word brings out the plural idea, and could be translated literally as: "Oh the happinesses of the ones …." A literal translation of our reading is given below, showing the poetic parallelism.

[3]A. Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for <u>theirs</u> is the kingdom of heaven.
[4]B. Blessed are those who mourn,
for <u>they</u> shall be comforted.
[5]C. Blessed are the meek,
for <u>they</u> shall inherit the earth.
[6]D. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,
for <u>they</u> shall be satisfied.
[7]D'. Blessed are the merciful,
for <u>they</u> shall obtain mercy.
[8]C'. Blessed are the clean in heart,
for <u>they</u> God shall see.
[9]B'. Blessed are the peacemakers,
for <u>they</u> sons of God shall be called.
[10]A'. Blessed are the ones having been persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for <u>theirs</u> is the kingdom of heaven.

11. Blessed you are when people insult you
& persecute you
& say all kinds of evil things about you falsely
on account of me.

12. Rejoice and be glad, because your reward is great in heaven,
for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way.

There is a great amount of significance in the parallelism here and it bears much meditation and reflection. We can only touch on a few significant examples. Notice that:

1. The structure of the eight sentences in verses three through nine are identical, with the blessing given to a particular group in the first half and the reason given for the blessing in the second half – *for*.

2. There are two mirrored blocks of four blessings, shown in the poetic labelling as A-B-C-D-D'-C'-B'-A'. This is called *inverted parallelism* and is typically Hebraic.

3. The first and last blessings – A and A' – have identical reasons: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," which locks the composition in the mirrored form. Also note that these two verses use the possessive pronoun for the group concerned "theirs is …," whereas all the other six use the subject of the verb "they are …." Also, the present tense means the kingdom and its blessings are currently available to these people.

4. The end of the first block – D – is about "those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" and the end of the second block – A' – is about "those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness."

5. The first block of four feels more inward-focused, as if approaching God and his presence and salvation, whereas the second block feels more outward-focused, such as merciful, peacemakers, and those being persecuted. In this context, the people called "the clean in heart" is probably meant to refer to their attitude towards others, and so meaning their *integrity* in dealing with others.

The Beatitudes contain several key allusions to the Tanakh. The first two beatitudes probably allude to Isaiah 61:1–2: "The poor in spirit" (in Hebrew: *anawim*), the materially impoverished, who recognise God as their only hope. NET says verse three refers to the "pious poor" for whom God especially cares (Ps 14:6; 22:24; 25:16; 34:6; 40:17; 69:29). The Spirit-anointed Messiah in Isaiah 61 both preaches good news to the poor and comforts those who mourn, and here in his sermon, Jesus fulfils this calling them blessed.

The third beatitude alludes to Psalm 37:11 and Isaiah 61:7 – the meek inherit the land. The meek are those who out of recognition of their poverty of spirit – and out of their mourning in penitence – meekly submit to God as the Almighty and Holy One, and surrender to him. Of course, in Hebrew, the word *eretz* can mean *land* or *earth* but specifically refers to the inheritance of Israel there. Now Jesus says his meek followers will inherit the whole earth.

The fourth beatitude echoes Isaiah 55:1-3 – calling all who are thirsty and hungry to come to the Lord to eat and drink. This beatitude reflects the culmination of the inward journey to God, with the meek soul's spiritual hunger and thirst for righteousness being satisfied and so blessed.

The fifth beatitude reflects Exodus 34:6, where the Lord proclaims the essence of his nature – especially his mercy, compassion, and lovingkindness. This represents a turning from the inward journey of the individual who has found righteousness and spiritual satisfaction in God, to the outward journey and our response towards others. Such blessed individuals now show the characteristic of God – mercy towards others, and so they are blessed as they will receive the same mercy from God.

The sixth beatitude may hint at Psalm 24:3-5. Those who come into God's presence are the ones with "clean hands and a pure heart." Assuming this is a further progression in the outward journey, the meek souls who have known and seen God and received his righteousness are now the ones who move out with mercy and integrity of heart and experience God's presence in their lived experience in the world.

The seventh beatitude echoes Psalm 34:14 – those who have turned from evil to do good and now who "seek peace and pursue it." What an amazing mission for the saints of God – to be peacemakers in our troubled world!

The eighth beatitude is a general theme of the Scriptures; those who live in the world *for righteousness* often find themselves persecuted by those still in the control of the prince of this world. This persecution is then picked up in the epilogue – turning from the general "they" of the beatitudes to the specific "you" of Yeshua Messiah's followers. The disciples can be encouraged that if they suffer "on account of me" (see Matt 23:30-37; Acts 7:52) they join with God's saints and prophets down the generations who have suffered the same persecution.

ACNA Readings

Introduction. My uncle – a lawyer – and his wife – a legal researcher – spent their vacations in courthouses, libraries, and among elderly relatives researching the family's genealogy. On these busman's holidays, they discovered a wide and wild variety of facts about their ancestors. Today, as we consider All Saints' Day our readings are like a genealogy researched for us as Christians.

Common theme. Ecclesiasticus takes us into the past – instructing us to remember the famous and also to cherish the heritage of forgotten but godly persons. The psalm is a shout for joy to the Lord as the faithful execute retribution upon the nations. Revelation takes us into the future when the tears of God's people are wiped away by God himself. The reading from Matthew is of course part of the Sermon on the Mount in which the behaviors and the blessings of God's people are detailed. In other words, the focus of today's readings – appropriately for All Saints – is on God's people.

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-14. It may be useful to review the history of the book of Ecclesiasticus. You may be more familiar with it as the Book of Sirach because it is thought to have been written by the Hebrew

scholar ben Sira. In about 117 BC, it is commonly known in its Greek form; the Hebrew original was lost and then recovered piecemeal.

The passage starts by discussing famous and important people, rulers, counsellors, prophets, people distinguished by wisdom or talent, musicians and authors, rich people who live peaceably, in fact, all who were honoured in their times. The author then goes on to discuss that some are remembered down through time, while others are forgotten and might seem never to have existed. Yet righteous deeds live on. Children and children's children receive an inheritance and have a godly heritage. In that sense, godly people live on buried in peace, but "their name lives on generation after generation" (44:14). On All Saints', we remember those whose names live on in godliness, whether they were famous, or like the rest of us, lovers of God, holders of faith, leavers of a righteous – if anonymous – legacy.

Psalm 149. This psalm is the penultimate psalm in the book. The last five psalms all begin and end with "Praise the Lord!" Psalm 149 gives us a method for praising the Lord, which is to sing a new song publicly in the assembly of the godly. God's roles as creator and king of Israel are the cause for praise, singing and dancing, and playing the tambourine and lyre. The centrepiece of the psalm – verses four, five, and the beginning of six – gives us a detailed explanation of God's attitude: he takes pleasure in us and he adorns the humble with salvation. And so the godly exult, singing for joy with the highest praise for our God!

This psalm may be a picture of a public celebration, possibly of a military victory since the end of verse six begins a theme of warfare. A two-edged sword is wielded in punishment and vengeance is executed. Kings are in chains and nobles in iron fetters, and thus judgment is accomplished. Surely, this is a picture of the future that should cause us to pray for and speak to all whose future is described here in such a dark way. We need to turn to the Revelation reading for encouragement for all who sin and yet come to repentance and faith in the Lamb of God. In any case, our faith in the Lord Jesus will be vindicated in victory.

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