Morningside Sermon 10.30am 1/11/26

Saints Everywhere

Revelation 7:9-17; I John 3:1-3

Having taken you down the highways and bye-ways of the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, let me take you by the hand as we venture into another rarely-visited Bible book, The Revelation of John at the end of the New Testament. Except for a couple of passages, like the vision of the redeemed in or reading, or that of the heavenly Jerusalem in the last two chapters, Revelation remains largely unread. It has always had a difficult reputation, and it was a struggle to include it in the books of the Bible. The C16th Reformers weren't too keen. Luther thought it theologically inaccurate; Zwingli pronounced it, "no Biblical book"; and John Calvin passed over it in silence.

John didn't write it as the 'last book in the Bible'. He wrote because these letters and thoughts were written for people he knew and felt a pastoral responsibility. It was written to be read out loud at services in the new Christian communities in what we now see as western Turkey. Possibly written around C95AD, written by John of Patmos to first century Christians who were in crisis. This John was a Jewish-Christian prophet. The seven churches written to had been established by Paul and his co-workers. Paul was long dead, and so were the first disciples of Jesus. The Roman Empire, under Emperor Domitian, was troubled with wars across its wide territory. Christians faced physical and existential attacks. Should they stand firm and be distinctive, and face the consequences from a suspicious Roman Empire, or should they compromise and collaborate with the authorities to 'fit in', and face the consequences from God. A surprisingly contemporary ring. As Christians today do we speak up and speak out about injustices and inequalities and unfairness of society, the questionable politics, economics and missing moral compass of political leaders nationally and internationally? Or are we called to make our faith easy and attractive, gently

welcoming, personally spiritual, and not too radical? Are the two mutually exclusive? C1st and C21st Christians face the same issues. How we choose to respond defines our faith, and shapes our Church, and illuminates, or darkens, our own Christian lives. Living authentic Christian lives, brings us into conflict with culture.

In a world darkened by fear and greed and suspicion, like those first Christians, are we called to be the ones to shine, the saints of today? The climate in which the Christian lives and breathes should be a climate of resurrection, pilgrimage and love. We believe stubbornly in new life; we believe in the importance of movement with purpose and focus. We believe in the practice and living out of love, being and doing good. The past, present and future interact to call us, and those who journey with us, into the presence of God and the ways of God's work so that we can show, humbly, what difference believing and doing still make in our world today. How very different from our contemporary world and its current politics and media - too often atomised, absent, anxious and cynical.[i]

How saintly are you feeling this morning? Halo polished, beatific smile glowing? Don't you worry if your saintly sparkle isn't quite what you hoped it might be. Just look at the mixed bag Jesus had to work with. Paul and his crew were scarcely better. The clutch of churches John of Patmos wrote to were equally assorted. Inconsistent, lacklustre, beaten-down. In desperate need of encouragement. Which is what John of Patmos tried to do.

John knew that these new Christians had been rejected by Jew and Gentile alike. They faced a serious crisis of community and personal identity. So John writes about, 'Who are the People of God?', and 'What is the meaning of belonging to the Church?' Not abstract theological questions, but burning issues for John's readers. They still are today.

In his fevered imagination, John looked around. What did he see in his mind's eye? *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb…"* When they, when we, feel diminished and diminishing, this vision of heaven rings out. We are not alone. Others went before us. Others are around us. Others will follow on afterwards. These saints. Not flattened-out images in pretty books or colourful stained glass. But flesh-and-blood people, flawed and fabulous. Just like us. Succeeding and failing and trying again. Doing what saints do: helping and loving and caring and giving and sharing and believing and doubting and worshipping and persevering. At the very least, in John's heaven, there are white robes and palm branches and singing angels and people from every culture and generation across the known and unknown world. So many they couldn't be counted. Coming from everywhere, every race and tribe and nation and language. And they sing. It's what saints do. It's why we sing each Sunday, in this microcosm heaven called Morningside.

Saints everywhere! Vatican II, the reforming and transforming Roman Catholic Council in the mid 1960s, tackled a lot of things in the Roman Church. One thing it did was to shift saints from being powerful protectors and intercessors, to being examples and signs of God's working Kingdom. Saints were recast to be models of Christian life and closeness to God. The climate of the world was to be no longer chilled by distant saints but by tangible examples of practical and transforming living. Others have said that saints, based on Bible writing like the Letter to the Hebrews, were there to make holiness palpable. Saints are to demonstrate the credibility of Christianity.[ii] They demonstrate that first singly, but ultimately together as the united body of Christ, being Christian is possible, desirable, glorious! In communion with all the saints. Christian

faith is not a solitary occupation, it is a joined-up, cohesive community of faithful endeavour. We belong to one another.

There are saints everywhere.

Pope John Paul II, or rather St Pope John Paul II, had great joy in the saints. He made lots of them in his pontificate. He created more saints than all the other C20th popes put together. I think the number is 483. Saints everywhere.

In the reformed tradition of which the Church of Scotland is part saints are everywhere too. Not rarified specialists, but ordinary everyday people who live the lives God gave them and use their time and talent and money, their faith and hope and love, to attempt to make this world a better place. Still going through a challenging run of funerals, having written seven eulogies, and with one still to come, I am struck again and again, despite these glowering times, by how much light and goodness there is ***still*** in the world. In this Church, with the people who have lived and died in membership now adding to the innumerable multitudes of heaven. Your loved ones, my friends and parishioners. Complex, controversial, challenging, generous, faithful, imperfect, aspirational, hopeful. The communion of saints are friends spread across space and time. Saints provide for us a broad network of relationships, intimate or glancing, that extends beyond the family to include the believing world. Saints remind us of the importance of friendship, their consolation in our times of trouble, their delight in our times of joy. Centuries ago All Saints' day used to be marked not on the first Sunday of November but the Sunday after Pentecost, the day called the Church's birthday. That makes sense, because saints really make sense in the community of the Church.[iii]

Saints matter, and there are saints everywhere.

Charlie Robertson was minister of the Canongate Kirk for many years. He died this year. One of the Church of Scotland's characters. One Sunday he was met by a sad probationer minister who

lamented that there were only 50 people in Church. “Oh no,” said Charlie, “the place was packed.” “But I counted only 50”, said the probationer. “Well, there was James V, and Mary Queen of Scots, and Rizzio; there was Adam Smith, and Clarinda, and most of the previous ministers. And all of the previous elders, and members of the congregation and…and…and…” And he reeled off many names. For Charlie the communion of saints was a reality, not a theological nicety. So it is here in Morningside. Saints visible - that’s you. Saints invisible - that’s the others who once worshipped here. The good ones, the ‘could-do-better” ones, the ones in the windows. The ones we liked, and the ones we didn’t. And all the rest.

Saints everywhere. Believe me. Believe God.

Oh, and it’s your turn to be a saint, right now.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

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[i] *From a lecture ‘Friends in High Places, the Joy of Saints’, Rev Canon Professor Liz Stuart, Winchester Cathedral, 28th October 2026*
[ii] *Rowan Williams, Sermon November 2009, All Saints Margaret Street, London*
[iii] *Stuart, ibid*