

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. Today is All Saints Day and tomorrow is All Soul's, these are church festivals that I will say a bit more about later. They are also important days for me personally – today is the anniversary of my father dying, also on a Sunday, and tomorrow is the first anniversary of my ordination and induction. Sadly, due to COVID, Rayleigh won't be laying on fireworks to celebrate this year, and the lectionary could have been kinder to me as well, but you have to play the hand you're dealt with, so let us worship God!

Call to Worship (inspired by Matthew 5: 1-12)

Wonderful is the God of Christ, who gathers the poor of the earth.

Glorious is our God, who wipes away the tears of sorrow.

Wonderful is the God of Christ, who gives inheritance to the meek.

Glorious is our God, who satisfies the hunger of the just.

Wonderful is the God of Christ, who gives mercy to the merciful.

Glorious is our God, who gives vision to the pure in heart.

Wonderful is the God of Christ, who adopts the peacemakers.

Glorious is our God, who lifts high the persecuted.

Wonderful is the God of Christ, who finds the lost.

Glorious is our God, who awakens the dead.

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Hymn O Lord my God... (R & S 117)

Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed;

And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die - I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:

When through the woods and forest glades I
wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze;

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home- what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration
And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art!

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!*

Opening prayer (based on Revelation 7:9-17)

Today we give thanks to God for those special Christians whom we tend to see as the lesser saints, and also for all souls who have departed this life in faith and love – many of whom remain especially dear to your hearts.

Thanks be to God, for those whom we have loved dearly but are out of our reach for a short while. After this I saw a vast crowd, which no one could count; people from every nation, of all tribes, cultures and languages.

They were in their white baptismal robes, and had palms in their hands, and they shouted:

“The final victory belongs to God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

They shall never again feel hunger or thirst, the sun shall not beat on them or any scorching heat, because the Lamb of God will be their Shepherd and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes.

Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour, power and might, be to our God for ever and ever. Amen

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URC Prayer Handbook p116:

Comforter of the mourning, lifter of lowered heads, strengthener of tired limbs,
raise our eyes to see your glory, open our lips to sing your praise.
Free our hearts to worship you in the company of your children,
our sisters and brothers who see you now:
Our Lamb, our shepherd, who wipes every tear from our eyes,
and leads us to the water of life. **Amen**

Offertory

Those who are summoned to share God's love respond to the cries of the poor. Holy One, help us to respond to the cries of the poor, through our gifts, through our actions, through our speaking out on behalf of those with no voice, and through our prayers. In Jesus name, Amen

Introduction

Today is All Saint's Day, which I tend to get mixed up with All Soul's Day which is tomorrow, though really there is not that much difference. Hopefully, I have got this right – All Saint's also known as All Hallows, which is why yesterday was Halloween (Hallow's eve) is a Christian celebration in honour of all the saints. The confusion comes, especially for Reformed people who don't have much truck with Saints, is that a saint can be person who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness or closeness to God, like Saint Teresa of Calcutta, or Saint Oscar Romero, or all the faithful who have departed for heaven, or even just all Christians – Paul often addresses his letters to 'God's beloved, called to be saints' or simply to 'all the saints' in a particular location. All Soul's day is a commemoration of all those who have died, saints or not. Suffice to say, this time at the start of November is the season the church traditionally remembers those who have died. And there are all sorts of traditions around the world celebrating this, including Day of the Dead celebrations when families go to the cemetery and eat, drink and celebrate with their departed relatives. I am indulging myself slightly with the next piece of music and its link to a saint, which I hope, once the music book comes out in a few months, the band may learn. I heard it earlier this year on the BBC Radio 4 Sunday Worship, celebrating the life of Oscar Romero, the El Salvadorean Archbishop who was murdered while leading mass, for speaking out against the military government. The words represent the main themes of his teaching; namely that followers of Christ must hear the cries of the poor and marginalised. We have permission from The Wild Goose Collection to play the recording.

Hymn The Lord of the earth

The Lord of the earth is a holy God
whose passion and purpose are sure,
and those who are summoned to share God's
love
respond to the cries of the poor.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
God's holy purpose is sure.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
The Lord hears the cries of the poor.

The words of the prophets whom God inspired
cannot be just silently read.
Their summons to action must be obeyed;
our lives should reveal what they said.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Prophets cannot just be read.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Our lives should reveal what they said.

In Jesus our saviour we clearly see
the Church must be keen to forgo
its comfort and privilege and self-esteem
till Christ's is the lifestyle we show
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Privilege is what we forgo,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Till Christ's is the lifestyle we show.

4. With all of creation we join to sing
in praise of the Lord of the earth
who teaches that some things must change or
die,
and new life be brought to its birth.
Alleluia! Alleluia,
Sing to the Lord of the earth.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
New life must be brought to its birth.

Words: John L. Bell, based on texts of Oscar Romero Music: John L. Bell Tune: ROMERO Words & Music
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**Bible readings: Matthew 5:1-12
Revelation 7:9-17**

I don't usually preach on Revelation; partly because I don't know much about it! It wasn't one of the books we studied at theological college, in case you are thinking we studied all the books of the Bible, we didn't. And partly because, probably like many people in the URC, I have the misconception that it is about life after death and is fanciful and unbelievable, or that it is so full of metaphor and allegory that it is too much work to try to figure out the real message behind the weird stuff. As an article in September's *Reform* said, 'many Christians are uncomfortable with Revelation, put off by its violent imagery and apparently esoteric messages'. But the article went on to say that for most of history, it is not hatemongers who have found inspiration in the book, but people resisting oppression. It was a favourite text for the Anabaptists who were persecuted during the Reformation, and the Quaker leader George Fox, who denounced the exploitation of the poor, quoted Revelation more than any other book in the Bible. So, I am going to take the beast by the horns, and tackle Revelation!

Revelation is an ancient form of literature known as apocalypse. It is not meant to be straightforward, but people at the time would have been more familiar with the style. The plot revolves around a conflict between the powers of the world and Jesus and his followers. The Beast is a central image, and academic commentators usually think the Beast represents the Roman empire. It could also, by extension, represent all earthly powers that set themselves up against God and the kingdom of God, so is relevant to any society with unjust structures. One might choose, for example, to think of politicians who claim food expenses, while voting against a scheme to feed hungry children.

The Beast had such authority that it became the norm to think that its opponents were unrealistic. As the article in *Reform* points out, if you have ever criticized capitalism, or campaigned against war or nuclear weapons, you might be told to 'live in the real world'. Markets and systems have become idols we worship instead of God. Despite the violent imagery in Revelation, it is not violence, but a wounded lamb who saves us. God's kingdom comes about through vulnerability. Increasingly scholars think that Revelation was written not for Christians facing persecution, but for Christians living in relative comfort who were tempted to collude with the empire. Or as we heard in the song we listened to earlier: 'the Church must be keen to forgo its comfort and privilege and self-esteem till Christ's is the lifestyle we show'.

It is fairly obvious why the compilers of the lectionary include this reading from chapter 7 for today, as it provides a vision that we tend to think represents heaven – 'these are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal...they will hunger no more, and thirst no more, the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat...and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.' You could almost add, At the going down of that same sun and in the morning, we will remember them, as we will next Sunday.

Despite the Protestant view that unlike the Roman Catholics, we don't have saints, in fact we do. Those who are deceased, and those who are living and walking among us, and if we think with Paul, perhaps even we ourselves are saints. The word saint is not limited to the "greats" of history, for Paul and other writers in the New Testament use the term synonymously with *Christian* and, at times, *believer*. No matter how you define it, the word *saint* has broad implications, and that is perhaps the best way to describe this week's passage from Revelation. Verses 9-17 is a passage with broad implications too. In contrast to the first eight verses of chapter 7 which depict a specific number of worshipers, it casts a larger and more general vision of those who gather to worship around the throne of the Lamb. The writer describes a great multitude – too many to count, from every nation, people, and language. There is no limit to the scope of this multitude, be it geographic, ethnic, numeric, linguistic, or economic. The multitude is dressed in white, it is waving palm branches, and it is crying hymns of praise in a loud voice. Members of the multitude remain loyal to the Lamb, they wash their robes, and they worship in the temple. As a result, they are sheltered, they are fed, and they are protected. This multitude has found freedom in the One they worship. On this Feast Day of All Saints, Christians around the world gather to celebrate the lives of those saints who have gone on before us. We give thanks for those saints still living today. And we ponder how all of us -- you and me -- are called to live lives of sanctity. This passage reminds us that being a faithful witness -- like the great multitude -- is the baptismal vocation of us all. It also reminds us that when we live out our Christian vocation, we find freedom in the God who sustains all of us. Most importantly, this passage reminds us that the vision for sainthood is all encompassing. It is all-inclusive.

This text reminds us that Christianity and saint-hood can't always be reduced to a theological formula. Indeed, it was Jesus who said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). We are reminded that sanctity is partially Christian vocation, but also partially the work of God – it is God who will wipe every tear away. Sanctity doesn't come from us, it comes from the Lamb in whose name, person, and earthly vocation we are made free to approach the throne with boldness. We do not become saints by our own determination and self-discipline. Sanctity is a divine gift. It is indeed the power of the resurrection at work in human lives. So, commemorating the saints is nothing other than a way of affirming that the transformative power of Christ is at work all about us in human lives. And nothing to do with pumpkins and scary stuff, by the way!

Prayers of intercession from the World Council of Churches – next page

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 1 November 2020

Lord our God, we thank you for the many people
who have followed your way of life joyfully:
for the many saints and martyrs, men and women
who have offered up their very lives so that your life abundant
may become manifest and your kingdom may advance.

O Lord, we thank you for the truth they have learned and passed on to us.
Give us courage to follow their way of life.
For your love and faithfulness, we will at all times praise your name.

We pray for the millions in our world who must go hungry today,
all who are exploited and marginalized because of their caste or class, colour or sex,
that they may not lose their hope, and may find the strength to struggle for their dignity.

We call upon you for those who are persecuted, imprisoned, tortured
or threatened with death because of their witness to justice and peace.
For those who have “disappeared” because they dared to speak,
that their spirits may not be broken by their bodies’ pain.

We remember those who live in regions torn by tension and war,
by disaster, famine and poverty...
We pray for the millions of refugees around the world,
that in the midst of tears and bitterness they may discern signs of hope.

Lord, into your hands we commend our earth, ever-threatened with disaster,
and all persons and situations we have spoken about,
written down or remembered in the silence of our hearts this day.
Strengthen our will for peace and justice;
increase our faith in your kingdom
where “love and faithfulness will meet,
righteousness and peace will embrace”
and may your will be done here on earth as it is in heaven. Amen

Lord’s Prayer

Hymn For all the saints (R&S 658)

For all the saints, who from their labours rest,
who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed:

Refrain:
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might;
thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;
in deepest darkness thou, their one true light:

Oh, may thy servants, faithful, true, and bold,
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
and win with them the victor’s crown of gold:

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine:

From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
and sing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost:

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A reminder that next Sunday is Remembrance Sunday and the service will start at 10.45am.

Blessing for All Saints Day

Go on your way rejoicing;
Surrounded as you are by such a great cloud of witnesses,
take courage as you face each new challenge, and comfort when you pick yourself up from a fall,
In whatever good you choose to do, precede it with hope,
accompany it with prayer and follow it with thanksgiving.
And the blessing of God Most Wonderful, whom the saints have trusted as
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you all now and ever more. Amen

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