

All Saints

Last week we had a lesson from the Book of Nehemiah. When I gave it as the lesson on the bulletin I had many people respond by saying they had never seen a lesson from Nehemiah at the Eucharist. Well, I did take it from the English Common Worship lectionary for Bible Sunday. We heard in the lesson how the people of Israel wanted to hear 'the Word of the Lord' as read to them by the Prophet Ezra.

Today I decided to include the Apocrypha reading from II Esdras rather than the one from Jeremiah. Here we come across the prophet Ezra once again. I read through this lesson and thought to my self, "Wow, this is what I imagine heaven must be like." The vision Ezra saw amazed him just as much. "And I was held spellbound," he says, and then he goes on, "Then I asked an angel, 'Who are these, my lord?' He answered and said to me, 'These are they who have put off mortal clothing and have put on the immortal, and have confessed the name of God. Now they are being crowned, and receive palms.'" Then I thought, "Hang on, all this sounds awfully familiar. Where had I heard this before?" Well, the second lesson from Revelation provided the answer. "Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"

Now, those of you who know my interest in family trees will have realised that it is the detective work in finding out about the families that interests me most of all. Thus having found these similarities between an Old Testament or rather a Apocryphal Book and New Testament Book I wanted to know more about II Esdras and in particular this passage and see if it hadn't perhaps influenced John the Divine in his writing of his own Revelation.

Let me get a bit technical for a few moments. The Book we now call 2 Esdras (which is Greek for Ezra) is an Apocalyptic book – meaning it deals with the end times. But in fact of the 16 chapters only chapters 3 to 14 are from the original Hebrew while chapters 1-2 and 15-16 are later Christian additions and are found only in the Latin version and not the Greek or Hebrew versions. And in fact these chapters contain lots of influences from *The Revelation of Jesus to John*. So it looks like it is Revelation that is influencing Esdras. Revelation is of course also an Apocalyptic book as is Daniel in the OT. End of the Bible Lesson.

Now, when we read any Scripture we must examine it by asking ourselves 4 questions. Who wrote it? To whom was it written? How did its first readers interpret it? What does it mean to us today? Well, we've answered the first question on this passage from Esdras– it was written by early Christians and added as a preface to Esdras' original text.

To whom was it written and why? Well, we must remember that the early church was under tremendous persecution in its first 3 centuries. Many Christians, normal believers like you and me, would have died as martyrs. They were in most cases perfectly normal men and women who had been taught about Jesus and the life Jesus wanted them to lead. They were no heroes. Rather they were and still are our sisters and brothers in the faith; they are with us on the way of faith - alongside us as companions and guides, sustaining us with their prayers and guiding us by their example and their very public witness to Christ. And it is here in the celebration of these holy and awesome mysteries of the Eucharist that in those words of the author of 2 Esdras Chapter 2 and the Revelation chapter 7 we see the great number waiting to be judged- we too are called to stand before that throne, the judgment seat of the altar. Each person in this Church is to ask God for His mercy and to shout 'Victory to our God and to the Lamb' as though our lives depend on our devotion, our belief and our actions to others, as they most surely do. What a contrast to that dull, rather pedestrian, committee-speak and committee-bound, utilitarian view of the Church which all too frequently we experience at Synods and Parish Council meetings, which is hardly likely ever to inspire or convert anyone to anything.

I am hoping in the All Saints Sunday Service this morning to capture – even if for a moment this vision of the Church which is God's and not ours; where yes, we recognise readily the brokenness and sinfulness of our frail humanity - knowing our need of God - yet at the same time rejoicing in the abundant mercy and grace of the God who in Christ has come among us and alongside us; who accepts us just as we are, and whose Holy Spirit is already at work in and through each one of us in this sacramental celebration of the Eucharist, for transformation; and to change the dust of all our feebleness, frailty and sinfulness - into the sight of His glory.

And we are blessed by the sight of His glory at this Eucharist because God is present here in the bread and wine and if you choose to debate the whys and wherefores of that, so be it, but you are wasting your time and God's. You are blessed! You are blessed by His presence and by his grace.

"Blessed are you!", Jesus says, "all you who are poor in spirit, gentle and merciful, you who mourn, who care for what is right, who are pure in heart, who make peace, you who are persecuted! Blessed are you!" But the words of Jesus may seem strange. It is strange that Jesus exalts those whom the world generally regards as weak. He says to them, "Blessed are you who seem to be the losers, because you are the true winners: the kingdom of heaven is yours!" Spoken by him who is "gentle and humble in heart" these words present a challenge which demands a deep and abiding change of the spirit within us, a great change of heart, a realization that the orientation of this world is often wrong, that we are journeying to new life, not running away from death.

In the end, Jesus does not merely speak the Beatitudes. He lives the Beatitudes and calls us to do the same. He is the Beatitudes. Looking at him you will see what it means to be poor in spirit, gentle and merciful, to mourn, to care for what is right, to be pure in heart, to make peace, to be persecuted. This is why he has the right to say, "Come, follow me!" He does not say simply, "Do what I say". He says, "Come, follow me!" This is a call that all the Saints have followed to this day, and a call that transcends differences in race, gender, sexual orientation and speaks to our very souls on this great feast **ALL** Saints.

Like the first disciples at the Sea of Galilee, we must leave our boats and nets behind; leave our prejudices and fears, and that is never easy - especially when we face an uncertain future and are tempted to lose faith in a Church which seems to be in a state of constant flux but which, I can assure you, will never fail. To be good Christians may seem beyond our strength in today's world. But Jesus does not stand by and leave us alone to face the challenge. He is always with us to transform our weakness into strength. Trust him when he says: "My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" So to those of you who hope for a better life, for schooling which gives your children some hope of a better future, for a city which houses the poor and does not pander to the rich, for transformation in our country, nation and lives, for those of you who mourn loved ones, for those of you who hurt, this is your day, this is your chance to trust fully in God. This is your day to offer all those worries up to the risen Lord and say 'in you, I trust', as the saints have done for centuries. Lift up your hearts. Lift them up to the Lord. Trust in Him, and your soul shall live.

'Do you know who these people are, and where they have come from? These are the people who have been through the great persecution and have washed their clothes clean in the blood of the Lamb'. These saints are our brothers and sisters and this is who we are all called to be, this All Saints Day and every day of our lives. So let us "praise those who had stood valiantly for the name of the Lord."

Praise the Lord. O praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.

Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his abundant goodness.

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord : O praise the Lord!