

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Evelyn Sweerts on Sunday 3 November 2019

Texts: Isaiah 40.27 – end; Revelation 19.6-10

Year C: All Saints; Evensong

The Church does not exist... except as the living community of Christian people on earth and beyond death. We are the saints: those of us here now, and those who have gone before, whether we remember them by name or not, and those who are still to come. We are the saints, the Church, the Bride of Christ. It's a quite beautiful and inspiring image, isn't it? To paraphrase CS Lewis in *the Screwtape Letters*: the Church is spread through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. But then, that's a demon's perspective.

Do you know *The Screwtape Letters*? Well worth a read if you haven't yet. They purport to be the letters of a senior demon to his young nephew, giving advice on how to tempt the human he has been assigned. Screwtape goes on to say about this eternal Church:

"... fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided."

With the best will in the world and the most optimistic and rose-tinted spectacles on, there is a gap between the majestic vision of the church through time and the messy reality of being the church here and now.

So this All Saints, let's see what we can learn about the community of saints, the Church, from our readings.

The reading from Revelation speaks of the church as a bride. That image of the bride first emerges in the Old Testament, where Israel (or sometimes Jerusalem) is portrayed as the bride of Yahweh. Jesus picks this up when he refers to himself as the bridegroom, and it is St Paul who transfers this prophetic imagery to Christ and the Church.

Underpinning this metaphor is a biblical understanding of marriage. The ideal expressed in the Bible speaks of passion, deep mutual knowledge, intimacy, and fruitfulness. When the marriage metaphor is used, it is to evoke those ideals about Christ and his Church. I wonder what it would look like, if we took that metaphor of our relationship with Jesus seriously? I wonder what difference it would make?

Our passage from Revelation says that the Bride 'has been granted to wear fine linen, which is the righteousness of the saints'. Note that the fine linen is a gift: the Church's sanctity is Christ's achievement. Nevertheless, that mention of the saints' righteousness can read like there is some tension between faith and works: in other words, what God does and what we do.

The command in the text is clear: worship God. That is our work. To use the language of Isaiah, our work is to wait upon the Lord. That is what saints do. Saints are those who worship God. And God's work is to renew our strength and sanctify the Church.

There are saints alive today for whom these texts have a sharp edge: the persecuted Church cannot worship God openly and is desperately waiting upon the Lord to renew her strength. The scale of persecution is shocking. One in nine Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution. In 2018 almost 2000 churches were attacked.

The traditional hymns for All Saints contain verses describing the gruesome deaths of the martyrs. We tend to avoid singing these uncomfortable words today, which are so far removed from our experience in the contemporary

West, but reflect the context in which John wrote the Book of Revelation and in which many Christians find themselves today. So on this celebration of All Saints, I gladly pass on the appeal we were given at Archdeaconry Synod to support the work of Open Doors through prayer, advocacy, financial giving, or writing letters to persecuted Christians. Knowing they are remembered by saints elsewhere does much to encourage these persecuted Christian communities.

Let us then pray for the persecuted saints across the world that the Lord will renew their strength.

Let us pray for the saints who have gone before us to worship God and join their voices to the voice of the great multitude.

Let us pray for ourselves, that we might worship God and be granted to wear fine linen.

Let us pray for all saints.

Alleluia and Amen.