

3rd November 2019 All Saints

Daniel 7: 1-3; 15-18; Ephesians 1: 11-22; Luke 6: 20-31

INTRO

For many years we were part of a church in London dedicated to Saint Stephen. And one of its late Victorian windows pictured him, his face shining like an angel, but also a pile of stones in one corner as the reminder of his martyrdom – which was the part of the story most relished by local schoolchildren on their tours around the building! Stephen's death echoes Jesus' words in today's gospel, which speaks of the persecution and opposition which we may all face as followers of Christ, but also of the eternal riches which are ours, and our hope of heaven.

St Stephen's church had many other saints in its windows, including Dorothy and Agnes, which was forward thinking in its inclusivity. Some years later, however, when a kitchen was created inside the church, taking in their window, Dorothy and Agnes ended up above the kitchen sink. (I'm over it now...)

For many of us, our ideas of saints will be determined by windows in churches and cathedrals, which depict the heroes and heroines of our faith, much as the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 11 of that letter depicted the heroes of the Jewish faith as models to inspire and guide us.

But I am most helped on this All Saints Day by the story of the child who, when asked *'What is a saint?'*, looked around her in church and said, *'A saint is someone who the light shines through'*.

And as I focus mainly on our second reading from the letter to the Ephesians, it is the theme of light, expressed as glory, which we will look at especially.

These verses from Chapter 1 are pretty tightly packed and I'd encourage you to have your readings sheet in front of you, and possibly a pen, as we don't have any verse numbers or paragraphs to help us get the sense of it.

Paul is writing to Christians who are both Jews and Gentiles, and he is keen in this letter to promote unity within the church rather than division or hierarchy. In our

first few verses he writes first of 'we', that is the Jewish believers, and then of 'you', the non- Jews. And to both groups he holds out their inheritance as God's people. We Jews, he says, were part of God's plan, as his own people, destined for the inheritance in Christ, the first to believe- 'to set our hope on Christ', and the first to live 'for the praise of his glory'. That's why in the gospels Jesus went to the synagogue first in each village and town he visited, to proclaim the kingdom and help Jews to see that their longed for and prayed Messiah was here.

But immediately, Paul complements this with 'you also', and lays out the means by which the Gentile Christians are now also 'in Christ' and assured of the same inheritance: this process involves 3 things.

*When you had **heard** the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had **believed** in him, and **were marked with the seal** of the promised Holy Spirit*
Hearing, believing and being receiving the Holy Spirit, who guarantees redemption and adoption as God's own children, and then the phrase is almost repeated, 'to the praise of his glory'.

So these opening verses of our passage point towards the same inheritance for all believers, whether or not they are Jewish, since Christ came as the light of the whole world.

But they also point to how we are to live, in the light of this amazing promise. And that is 'to (or for) the praise of his glory'.

Which is where the light comes in.

Glory in the Bible is the way in which , usually through light, we humans can see, both physically and spiritually, see and begin to grasp, see and tentatively start to understand, just a tiny part of who God is, what God is like.

Think of Moses who went up the mountain to speak with God face to face and came down his face shining with the glory of God.

Think of Peter James and John who went up the mountain with Jesus and beheld his glory at the transfiguration.

Or of Bethlehem shepherds who both saw and heard God's glory as the angels appeared to tell them of Jesus' birth.

Of course here in this life we only see as through an ancient dim mirror, darkly, and we only know in part, but these are glimpses towards the time when we will see God face to face, and know fully, just as we are fully known (as 1 Corinthians 13 puts it so eloquently).

In the following verses, Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians.

His prayer, handed down to us as God's word in the Bible, is for us too, as we read it today and hear it, we can make it our own prayer for others and ourselves. And what Paul asks for, essentially, is more glory in our lives; for enlightenment, seeing, for *a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him*, which is part of the Holy Spirit's greater work in us.

And in a wonderful Pauline turn of phrase, he explains the effect of this wisdom and revelation:

- *The eyes of our hearts will be enlightened* – heart here refers to the whole inner life, our intellect, will and emotions. This is the ability to see beneath the surface of things, to discern, a gift we often notice in those who care deeply for others and are able to 'be there' for those in distress. It was very evident in the beautiful All Souls' service last night, enlightened hearts able to bring Christ's compassion, hope and light in the darkness of grief.
- Through this we will *know the hope to which he has called us*. **Know** here is not just head knowledge but relationship, as we may say we *know* our loved ones, at a level far deeper and higher than we know the 2x table or how to boil an egg... And **hope** also, is not a provisional, wavering emotion, but a solid and dependable reality based on God's glorious power and work, not ours.
- We will also know *the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints*. This is the same inheritance Paul has just spoken of, being part of God's

people in Christ and sharing the promise of eternal life with him.

And it is glorious- full of the light of God's presence!

In this passage the word *saints* is used, with a small 's'.

Not individuals, but all the saints together, all of us who have heard the gospel and believed in Christ, we are **all saints**.

- Finally in this prayer Paul asks that we may *know the immeasurable greatness of his power **for** us who believe,* for us, never against us, please note, and then he expands on what kind of power that is- it's God's great power which raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at His right hand over and above everything else in all creation, including the Church throughout the world and for all time....

What a prayer!

When you take your readings sheet home this week,

why not pray that prayer for a Christian you know- a saint who is in a tough situation, volunteering in a homeless shelter, caring for a relative with dementia, working in a challenging school... or for the Archbishop of Canterbury, facing criticism when he doesn't speak out and when he does, or our own bishop Paul as he serves in the House of Lords as well as here in Durham, or for neighbouring Christians sharing the gospel in their local communities, many of whom gathered at the castle this week to share and pray together in a very encouraging DH7 Churches meeting.

Before I close I want to return to stained glass windows.

And to our own, single, astonishingly beautiful Paradise window.

I think it says something important about our calling as the saints of Saint Brandon's today.

Firstly, because the choice was made- and many of you will have been part of the prayer and discernment leading to that choice- a choice not to show Brandon the man, but to depict the **hope** to which he and his fellow monks were called, just as we are, and to show the **glory of this inheritance**

as it is reflected in the light, colour and beauty of this world which God has created. The window enables us to look through Brandon to something more, to what we all share as Christians, as saints. Paul Tillich put it like this:

*a saint is someone who is transparent,
for something more than themselves to shine through their lives*

We are challenged, by our own paradise window and by Paul's prayer, to open our lives to the light of God, to glimpse his glory and allow it to shine through us. And this will happen as we allow the Holy Spirit to renew, refresh and transform us day by day.

One commentator on this very passage put it like this:

*The Holy Spirit is the one who reveals God to believers,
and enables them to see his glory and wonder.*

*God ceases to be a distant possibility and becomes
a shining reality in the lives of his people.*

Amen to that!

That is surely what it means *to live to the praise of God's glory.*

So dare we, here in Durham in 2019? Dare we in our homes and families, our neighbourhoods, workplaces, leisure time?

Or do we think this is only for selected holy men who wear long robes and sandals, grow beards and look solemn, or for pious spinsters who dress demurely and wear hats?

Dare we believe that God has plans for us, the saints of St Brandon's today, which only we can fulfil, through his power working in **us**? It's so easy to think we can't... I know.

So hear these words of Nelson Mandela, appropriately enough perhaps in the light of yesterday's rugby final, which may have brought disappointment to many of us but may, please God, have brought hope and unity to South Africa...

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your small playing doesn't serve the world.

May God grant us his light and power to live as his saints and his children and serve the world. Amen.