

Brancepeth Sermon

All Saints' Day 2020

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*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always.
Amen*

Today is All Saints' Day,
So the first thing I want you to do is look around you.
Let's start with the people here in the building
Especially since this will be the last Sunday for a while
on which we will be able to gather like this.
Look around at each other –
just briefly, glancing around,
I don't want this to be too embarrassing for you.
We've turned one of the cameras to face you,
so the people at home can see you too.

You're right here with me, in this building –
in more or less plain view, within earshot.

If current restrictions allowed, I could shake your hands,
or even hug you
(or at least someone less awkward than me about such things could hug you).

We are physically present together,
gathered for worship and fellowship.

But *we are not alone*.

We are one part of a congregation
that also stretches out via Zoom into people's homes.
And we're just putting the pictures of the people at home
up on the screen here,
so that the people in the building can see them.

We can see you now.

And later on, when you're unmuted at the Peace,
we will hear you.

We can't touch you – we can't shake hands or hug you –
but you, too *are* gathered here with us.

You are as much part of this congregation, this gathering,
as anyone here.

And next week, if we're all back on Zoom,
we will *still* be a congregation;
we will *still* be together.

And that's not all.

There are some of you, I know, who are
watching this on a recording –
hearing my voice, and seeing my face,
some time in what for me is still the future,
this afternoon perhaps, or during the coming week.

I can't see or hear you, and I certainly can't touch you –
but you, too, are with us,
you are *part* of us – albeit in a different way.

You too members of this congregation, of this fellowship,
and you're worshipping with us, you're praying with us

even though we're spread out over time as well as space.

We are the church of St Brandon together.

And even *that* is not all.

In fact, it's a very, very long way from being all.

Think of it this way.

We had a reading just now from Matthew 5.

I'll refer to that a bit later, but for now

I want you to think about what happens a chapter later

when Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray,

by teaching them what we know as the Lord's prayer.

'Pray then in this way:' he says,

'Our Father in heaven...' – and so on.

'Our Father'.

Jesus prayed it alone, at first –

just his voice, raised to the Father.

but then – we don't know when it first happened,

whether it was right away or later on –

his disciples joined in.

They prayed the same words with Jesus.

'Our Father', they prayed –

praying to the one who was Jesus' Father and theirs –

their words joined to Jesus' words, praying together,

all gathered in one place.

But later still,

communities of Jesus' followers in different places

prayed the same prayer again –

joining their voices into the same prayer, the same words.

They were no longer all gathered in one place,

they no longer had Jesus with them

in a way they could see and hear and touch –

but they gathered in one prayer –
in Jerusalem, and Judaea,
and then in Samaria, and Asia Minor – and it spread. Dozens, then hundreds, then thousands,
then tens of thousands.

And the prayer got translated into other languages –
from Aramaic into Greek,
then into Latin and Syriac and Coptic and Armenian,
and French, and Spanish, and Swahili, and Mandarin –
and English.

And more and more people –
in their own churches, in their own homes,
scattered all around the world,
joined in the same words.
Scattered all around the world,
scattered all through time,
but gathered in the same prayer, praying it with Jesus.

Jesus said '*Our Father*' –
and all these voices joined in, saying 'Yes, ours:
Our Father, the Father of all of us'.
In our tens of thousands and then our hundreds of thousands and then our millions and then our billions.

And those of us gathered here –
in the building, or by Zoom,
or watching the recording later –
we are one part of this great gathering.
A small part – but we are included in it, we belong in it,
our voices part of that one prayer, praying it with Jesus.
Our Father.

'After this I looked,' John says in Revelation,
'and there was a *great multitude* that no one could count,
from *every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*, standing before the throne and before the
Lamb,
robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And, yes, I know that in the Book of Revelation,

this crowd is made up specifically of martyrs –

of those who had suffered for their faith, and died for it, whose blood had been poured out for it.

But they’re pictured as being there

around the throne of the lamb

not on their own,

but as the nucleus of an even greater company –

the company of *all* those who gather in prayer,

who gather in worship, before this throne.

And *that* is what ‘All Saints’ means.

That great company – *they* are the saints.

We are the saints.

‘Saints’ here isn’t a name for people who are especially holy, whose lives stand out peculiarly brightly in this great company.

In the Bible, ‘saints’ is the name for *all* of us:

anyone whose voice is joined with Jesus’ voice in that prayer; anyone who is part of Jesus’ company, Jesus’ family;

all who stand before the throne and before the lamb.

So when you looked around earlier –

and when you looked at those faces on the screen –

you were, believe it or not, looking at saints.

We are, of course, only one tiny part of that great company

of all the saints.

Most of them aren’t Anglicans.

Most of them aren’t English.

Most of them don’t speak our language.

Most of them aren’t white.

Most of them aren’t very much like us in any obvious way. Most of them don’t worship in quite the way we do –

in fact, most of them worship very differently.

Most of them live their Christian lives out
in ways that are quite different from ours.

But we *are all one company*, all sisters and brothers,
all our voices joined with Jesus' voice,
all praying together.

We are gathered round the throne together,
around the lamb, in worship.

And that's what keeps us together.

That's what unites us, what makes us one church.

Not that we all meet at the same time in the same place.

Not that we can all see each other and speak to each other. Not that we can all reach out and touch each other.

But that we are all *facing in the same direction* –
towards the lamb upon the throne, towards Jesus.

We are followers of Jesus together.

And that means that, as our Gospel reading tells us

we are followers of the one

who gave everything for righteousness –

which means for justice,

for the *setting right* of all our relationships –

and we follow one who blesses those

who hunger and thirst after such righteousness.

We're followers of the merciful one,

who blesses those who are merciful.

We're followers of the great peacemaker,

who blesses those who make peace.

We're followers of one who comforts those who mourn,

and who blesses those who comfort.

And – topically this week – we're followers of

the one who feeds the hungry,

giving without prevarication to *all* those in need,

and we're followers of one who blesses those who
show a compassion like his.

And we're followers of one who
sees the pain of continued separation and renewed lockdown
– the pain of being unable to see each other
and hear each other and touch each other
– the pain of being cut off from family and friends
– the pain of uncertainty and anxiety
– the pain of ill-health
– the pain of depression
– we're followers of one who sees all that
and does not turn away, or leave us to our own devices.

We are all saints.
because we are united by being gathered by Jesus
into his praying.

We are united by being gathered around his throne,
in worship.

We are united wherever we are, whoever we are,
whatever our needs.

And we are united as the recipients of his love,
and his promise.

Describing the great company gathered around the throne, in all their diversity and all their need,
the book of Revelation says

'the one who is seated on the throne will *shelter* them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

the sun will not strike them,

nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the centre of the throne

will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

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Amen