

**5 November 2023    All Saints' Day**

**Psalm 34; Rev 7: 9-12; Matt 5:1-12**

**Prayer:**

Gracious Lord, Open your word to us now  
and open our hearts to your word.  
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

***Your reward is great in heaven.***

That's the phrase which stood out to me as I began to prepare this sermon.

Today's gospel is Jesus' well-known guidelines for life, Beatitudes, his interpretation of the Torah, the Jewish law about which Jenny spoke very helpfully last week on Bible Sunday - do catch up with her sermon online if you missed it.

Jesus' words fulfil and extend the Torah and make clear that God's blessing is upon those whose hearts are right before him, not just those who keep rules for the sake of not getting into trouble

I'm not going to talk about the gospel reading today, apart from that phrase **Your reward is great in heaven** and then we'll see how this links to our first reading from Revelation.

After talking straight about the trials and sufferings – hunger, mourning, persecution, which lie ahead for his disciples,

Jesus reminds them – 'Rejoice and be glad, for **your reward is great in heaven.**'

The concept of reward lies deep in our human psyche.

Reward is about fairness and justice.

Reward is being paid for work done.

Reward is getting what we deserve, not always positively.

Perhaps that's why TV crime dramas are so popular – we love to see the baddies getting their *just desserts*, (even if it takes several series to accomplish..)

Yes, reward is also about wrongdoing being punished.

That language may make us feel pretty uncomfortable.

Maybe even me speaking about 'reward' in the context of faith makes you squirm a little, as if we only follow Jesus so we can 'get to heaven'?

We are indeed right to be wary of the 'pie in the sky when you die' spirituality which has too often been used to control and oppress others, overlooking our responsibility in this life to care for and respect others.

And we have only to look at the tragic events being played out in Israel-Palestine today, to know that 'just desserts' and 'an eye for an eye' thinking lead to hatred, fear and violence, diametrically opposed to forgiveness, love and reconciliation.

We may conclude, therefore, that reward and justice are *not enough*, not enough in our broken world where we *fail* to love our neighbours, *fail* to hunger and thirst for righteousness, *fail* to be peacemakers...

Jesus comes to earth to prove, in his life, death and resurrection, that reward and justice are not the only mode of God's dealing with us – for if they were, we would all be condemned to die. No, in God's great mercy and amazing grace, Jesus took the *just reward* for the sin of the whole world, and gave his life to break the power of sin and death.

And thanks be to God, Jesus' resurrection initiated the new order of God's kingdom, on earth and in heaven.

Now we can share in the reward which Christ has won, our great reward in heaven.

Some people say that the two arms of the cross are reminders of this – the horizontal like the balance on the scales of justice, which means that sin has its price- and the vertical the flow of divine love and mercy from heaven to earth which sent Jesus to rescue humanity and bring us new life.

We know, therefore, that our reward in heaven is only ours because of the immense mercy and love of God our Father and of Jesus, our crucified and risen Saviour.

We celebrate this mystery every time we share the Eucharist and I hope the words we hear and say later may have fresh resonance today.

So to Revelation chapter 7, which describes what our great reward in heaven may be like.

We're often rather vague about heaven in church, so it's great to read this vivid description, part of John's apocalyptic vision, capturing what is beyond earthly knowing and quite a stretch for our imaginations too.

It shows us three characteristics of heaven:

**unity, worship, sanctuary.**

### **Unity**

John describes a great multitude, beyond counting, from every nation, tribe, people and language- this is the reuniting of broken humanity, the healing of the fragmentation which came at the tower of Babel, the restoration of dignity and worth to every person, whatever their race, gender or skin colour.

Can we even begin to imagine this unity in heaven?

This is the stuff of Wesley's hymns, Martin Luther King's Dream.

This is the unity of God's heaven, humanity ransomed, healed restored, forgiven, as another hymn writer put it.

We will one day know **unity**- unity through and in Christ, the Lamb on the throne of heaven.

Secondly, we see here the **worship of heaven**- worship offered by saints wearing white robes...

These robes denote the **access** the saints have to the throne of God, to God himself. We meet this too in Jesus' parable of the wedding guests, who can only be present at the banquet if they wear the robe given them by the host.

Here in Revelation 7, the worshippers have washed their dirty robes in the blood of the Lamb, the forgiveness given through the death of Christ, whose blood washes the guilty clean.

Blood, not gory but lifegiving, as in the cup of salvation we'll share later - the lifeblood of Christ which brings us back to God.

White robes – only through Christ's saving death can we come to worship God in heaven. Everyone needs a robe, and becomes part of the great company of heaven, joining in the worship.

There's singing, and crying out in loud voices, there's waving of palm branches like those who greeted Jesus entering Jerusalem.

There's joy and excitement- even- as everyone bows down before the Lamb seated on the throne.

This is wholehearted worship, the expression of love, thanksgiving and adoration to God, as all eyes are fixed on Jesus the Lamb.

We saints on earth may glimpse this as we worship God together here – those timeless moments on Sundays when God's presence in our midst is very real; or the soaring beauty of Durham cathedral filled with music; or the indescribable glory of a sunrise or a mountain top- all these are glimpses and foretastes of the **worship** of God in heaven, moments when, as saints on earth, we join in the song of the saints in glory.

**Unity, worship** and finally, **sanctuary**.

I struggled a bit to identify this word.

Safety, security, protection, all are here in John's description of how the Lamb who is the Shepherd watches over and cares for the saints in heaven. In the end I chose **sanctuary**, with its link to our cathedral's ancient north door, where fugitives were taken in and sheltered, because heaven is where we will find rest, peace and joy at the last.

It is our eternal home, where we are known, loved, safe for eternity.

God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; God knows the pains and sorrows we bear in this life: God himself is our **sanctuary**

Thus heaven is indescribably more awe-inspiring powerful and personal than the vague  
skyscape of harps, clouds and chubby angels which is often portrayed today.

We can know eternal life through Jesus now, and we hold  
the sure and certain hope that our reward is great in heaven.

This isn't a call to complacency, but to faithfulness,  
a call to live out what we pray-  
*Your kingdom come,*  
*your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

May we, God's saints here and now be faithful to this vision  
of God's heaven,  
living faithful lives which express and share in the unity,  
worship and sanctuary of heaven.

Thanks be to God.