

## *All Saints—Year A*

*(1 November or First Sunday in November)*

1. What sustains people during time of great distress? Is there any meaning to this earthly life? What happens after death? These “big questions” are religious questions with very practical implications, for the confidence with which we live this life and approach its stresses and strains very much depends on how we answer them. Today is a celebration of our Christian response to these questions.

2. Heaven is “the dwelling -place of God, the angels and ultimately of all the redeemed, wherein they receive their eternal reward” . (The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church) There are difficulties with this word ‘place’ and naturally as humans who dwell in time and space we are limited in our ability to think otherwise. Human images of heaven, therefore are often quite concrete.

3. Such is the magnificent , awe-inspiring and hopeful image in Rev. 7. 9-17: the multitude of those who are saved, the angels, all worshipping God. It is filled with hope as a time and place where there will be no more distress, no tears, no thirst and hunger, no death. We cannot explain heaven in any other way than in our own limitations, our own needs.

4. The vision of heaven gives hope. The beatitudes (Matt. 5. 1-12) were conveyed to the early Christian community to give them hope in the promise of the kingdom of heaven. For heaven is where God dwells, not necessarily a ‘place’. If you allow God to dwell in you, if you welcome him into your life, if you let him reign, then in that total surrender you will be sustained during times of stress, your life will have meaning, and death will be no threat to you. In this hope we live our daily lives.

5. We are God’s children. This hope sustains us for if we are his children then we are his heirs and ‘we will see him as he is’ . (1 John 3. 1-3) and we are confident that our home is and will be with him. Today we celebrate with all God’s children in every time and every place that we are the saints.

Sunday between 6 and 12 November Year A

1. Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23. 1-12 is extremely cutting. Jesus affirmed the Law: Do whatever they teach you. He himself had just given a summary of the Law: Love God and your neighbour as yourself. But he criticized and condemned the behaviour of the Pharisees—their heavy-handedness with others, their public parading, their self-importance.

2. When we hear it, we can squirm too as some of it hits home. "Practise what you preach" is said often enough. A common complaint from non-Christians is that church-goers are hypocrites. Sometimes it is deserved, although we feel naturally outraged when the charge is laid upon us.

3 But Jesus provides them with another injunction, one which displays what that love is in action: The greatest among you will be your servant. This image throws upside down the usual images of servants, the least in a household, the ones who do the menial jobs, the lowest paid, the least respected. This paradox is at the heart of the gospel. It is the fulfillment of the law.

4. In the collect for today we pray that we may love with our whole being, with our minds, our words and bodies. Service of others is at the heart of our discipleship as individuals and as a community. Each Eucharist we offer ourselves to God and we are sent out as servants to work in the world. We are ministering (serving) communities putting prayer and preaching into action.

5. The charge of hypocrisy comes from those who do not see our good works, or see our lights shine. Yet at the same time we need to keep in mind the warning to the Pharisees about being over-important, conceited and attention-seeking.

1. Advent is a season of mixed emotions. In our daily world we have the excitement and expectation of Christmas mixed up with end of year celebrations and the dawning of a new year. Do you remember in 1999 these emotions were mixed with a kind of threat of doomsday - remember the rumours? At the stroke of midnight your computer would no longer work and probably your DVD or anything else with an in-built clock would go wrong too. Well doomsday and excitement and expectation are all part of the Christian season of Advent where we wait for the coming of the Christ-child with joy, and wait for the coming of the Christ-Judge with doom in mind. I doubt that most of us do wait in doom, but that word just means judgment and it is a time to look back and judge our faith, and a time to think of the judgement of God in the end times.

2. Isaiah 64.1-9 presents the picture of an awesome God. Look at the language - "tear open the heavens", 'mountains would quake', 'nations might tremble' - a God to be feared, but not so for those who wait for him and seek to be obedient.

3. Following Jesus' ascension, the early Christians were expecting the return of Christ in judgment - the second coming. Passages like Mark 13.24-31 reveal how people thought in those days. In 1 Cor. 1.1-9 Paul speaks of their waiting. What were they to do while they waited? This question exercised their minds, and it is interesting that some thought the time should be spent in idleness or debauchery. Paul saw the time positively, even if he shared some of their millennial views. They had been given spiritual gifts, they were enriched by Christ in speech and knowledge, Christ strengthened them with his spirit. So they could be blameless at the end, judged by the way they had behaved in this between time.

4. And we are still waiting. What does the second coming mean today? "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again". We believe that Christ will come again. We are still in the time between the ascension and Christ's return. Advent challenges us about how we will live our lives? Will we recognise the gifts given to us, will we rely on Christ to strengthen us, will we strive to be blameless in the eyes of Christ our Judge? There is a view that we judge ourselves when we look on Christ himself and compare our own lives to his. May this Advent be a time of judgment as we wait to celebrate with joy and hope Immanuel, God with us.

[Sunday between 20 and 26 November]

1. The Feast of Christ the King celebrates the authority of Christ which leads us to seek his peace in his kingdom. It is a fitting finale to the Church's Year, and the readings are rich with imagery, helping us to grasp what it is to acknowledge the kingship of Christ and to live our lives in his service.

2. Matthew 25. 31-46 presents us with a courtroom scene, the final time of judgment when Christ the Judge will separate those who have followed him in service to others from those who have not. Only those who have served the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned will receive his blessing.

3. Ezekiel 34. 11-16, 20-24 pictures the shepherd separating his animals. The sheep which have butted out others, preventing them from grazing in good pastures will be excluded from the protection of the good shepherd who will save his flock and lead them to safety and good pasturage. This is a prophecy of hope to the downtrodden, the outcast, and the victims while a dire warning to the selfish and greedy.

4. In this global village we live in, these two readings are particularly relevant, both as cutting images which judge our lack of charity and service to others, and as images of hope for those who respond to Christ's call to follow him. Christian charity recognizes no boundaries. In a world where news and images are available to us, we know where there is hunger and thirst, oppression and lack of resources. We cannot look on without responding; we cannot continue to butt out others from our pastures; we cannot continue to keep our wealth to ourselves and not feed the hungry. Christ is our judge and his rules for judgment are clear.

5. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians (Ephesians 1.15-23) can be for us. May our faith and good works be a cause for thanksgiving. May we grow in a deeper understanding of what it means to live in Christ, and what the power of God can do in our lives through Christ who is supreme over all and whose fullness may be seen in the Church, the Body of Christ.

Sunday between 13 and 19 November Year A

1. Following on from the celebration of All Saints where we enjoyed the wondrous prospect of heaven - life with God - we now face the question 'Who are the redeemed?' We don't always like to think of judgment and we put it off to the last times, the end of life, the end of time, but the reality is we are judged every day. So, what are the matters on which we face judgment?

2. The parable of the talents (Matt.25.14-30) concerns God's requirement of us to give of our best, to put to good use the gifts given to us, and to live out the duties God has entrusted to us. The parable does not give greater value to the one given five talents over the one given one. What is important is what we do with our talents. In the parable judgment is pronounced and the treatment of the one who buried his talent is harsh.

3. So what do we make of this for our discipleship and ministry? Common complaints in our small churches are "We're all too old!" and "There's so few of us!" These are countered by our Bishop's saying "Do what you can and not what you can't!" Even among only a handful of elderly people, will be gifts which can be used to serve others. We need to recognize where our gifts are being used in our homes and the community and give thanks. We need to encourage those latent gifts to be dug up and used.

4. This is how Paul encouraged the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5. 1-11) on how they were to live as a community while waiting for the return of Christ. Be awake and sober, full of faith and love and hope, encouraging one another and building each other up.

5. In our ministering communities we aim to discern, edify and encourage the gifts that God has given each of us. We work as an organism, our gifts being used in a complementary way so that together we can be the Body of Christ, serving God in the world. Let us give thanks for the talents God has given us and pray that we use them for his glory.