

I have been having a conversation this week with my houseguest about the joy or happiness that Unicorns bring! My houseguest is slightly worried about the conversation, though it has led to some interesting banter about what brings us joy. It all started when on Thursday my niece in Australia who is 9, and was home sick from school and started texting me emoji's (from her Dad's phone) – which included 30 small graphics of a unicorn. The next read – I love you Aunty Christine and I love Unicorns! To which I replied 'I like unicorns too'. We have both recently seen the animated movie *Despicable Me 3* – in which a young girl who had always wanted a unicorn goes hunting in the jungle and finds one. Now without giving the movie away – her unicorn is actually a goat that has only managed to grow one horn – but for her it is the perfect friend – her own unicorn – but more importantly something which has brought joy into her young life.

I think that it is why my niece likes them too – they are playful and mysterious – but also makes her feel happy no matter how else she is feeling, or off school sick. Joy is something that often as we get older we forget to notice. So often, as my houseguest and I have discussed over the past few days', happiness is equated to success and wealth; or even the absence of hardship – but I am not sure that this necessarily has to be the case. Happiness is more present than this, happiness can even be hope of something that is not yet fully realised.

Now you may be pondering, how on a day when we remember the saints of God, and celebrate the wonder of the church, how unicorns and desire for happiness are relevant – and this may well be a good question to ask. But I was struck in a new way by the Gospel reading, which is regularly set for All Saints Day – and is the beatitudes. A psalm and promise of happiness – not perfection – and not necessarily success – but still a reading of hope and happiness.

The key word which we associate with beatitudes is 'blessed'. But what does blessed actually mean. The root word in *Greek word, makarios, which is central to the Beatitudes, is a fairly common word. As Susan Hysten point out in her commentary, it's not really hard to understand, but it's difficult to translate into English. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates "blessed," which is by far the most common translation of the Beatitudes. The problem with blessed is that it sounds a little unreal, like a quality that applies only to those saints whose stories we celebrate on All Saints Day and whose example may appear a bit unattainable to us.*¹ A closer translation is "greatly honoured." – but again this doesn't sound as connected to us as I think the beatitudes really are. A closer word in English is actually "Happy" and though it is not a perfect translation, because in our culture it can convey a thin, happy-go-lucky kind of happy. This is not what ancient philosophers meant, for they were well aware of the suffering and conflict humans experience. It cannot be what Jesus means either, or he would not call those who mourn "happy." He is describing a deeper happiness, the kind of happiness that only comes from aligning one's own will with God's. A happiness that helps

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3453

understand who we are, a sense of contentment in what we have achieved and what we are struggling with. Saints are people I think who have done this – they have come to terms with their vocation in life, been content with it, struggled with it – been happy in conversation with it.

All Saint's Day, is an opportunity for the Church to honour all saints, known and unknown. While we have information about many saints, and we honour them on specific days, there are many unknown or unsung saints, who may have been forgotten, or never been honoured specifically. On All Saints Day, we celebrate these holy men and women, and ask for their prayers.²

The concept of All Saints Day is connected to the doctrine of The Communion of Saints. This is the concept that all of God's people, on heaven and earth are spiritually connected and united. Saints are not divine, nor omnipresent or omniscient. However, because of our common communion with and through Jesus Christ, our prayers are joined with the heavenly community of Christians.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 350) testifies to this belief:

We mention those who have fallen asleep: first the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition...(Catechetical Lecture 23:9).

Or in other words – our lives and our prayers are a blessing on each. Our understanding of prayer, is at the heart of our understanding of the saints, a constant conversation of all who believe with God – a sense of happiness and blessing – it is quite a beautiful image and it has been part of the Christian tradition since the 2nd century.

When we celebrate the Saints, like the psalmists of old we, celebrate those who have served God in many ways. When the psalmists describes these people they would often say these people are happy because they live their lives in a way that is oriented toward God's loving-kindness. They see the world the way God sees it.

Matthew is saying the same thing. Those who long to follow God's word, who seek the righteousness, holiness, and justice of God, are "happy." Other people may appear happy outwardly. They may be successful in the world's terms. They may have expensive clothes or attend the 'right events. But that is not real happiness, for it does not reflect the things that are important to God. Matthew's account of Jesus teaching about happiness or blessedness, makes sense as something people strive for in this lifetime. Although they experience difficulty of many kinds, Jesus attributes a present-tense state of happiness to those he describes.

² <http://www.churchyear.net/allsaints.html>

The image we heard presented in our first reading from Revelation is a vision of a community which is striving together – not just for happiness but to reflect all that is possible in God. This is a purpose which we are all called to, and while there are many famous saints who each of us may aspire to be like – we can also each see to strive to live by the virtues and values of the saints each day.

All Saints Day is a day when we remember and notice those who inspire us in this way. One of the people we remember today is Viola. For those of you who are new, Viola was a long standing member of this congregation who died a year ago this week. Viola was a quiet Saint who allowed her faith in God to inform the way that she lived and the way that she served. It has been confronting in the last 12 months, as things didn't happen to notice the 'quiet and unnoticed' things which Viola used to do which made it easier for so many to come here and worship God. So often the saints we remember are those who brought about great transformations in the world and in the community of faith. But actually most saints are people who help the kingdom of God grow and survive, and most people would never notice that these things are happening. Viola was such a saint, and so are many others – who influence how we see God and learn to serve God. Maybe you can take time today to think of those who have impacted on your life?

The communion of Saints is a wonderful image – of those who have gone before, of those we know and don't know now, and those who will come after us – all sharing in the Eucharist together – the vision of Revelation – the hope of the beatitude – that all shall be blessed. As I was thinking about this image of the Communion I was reminded of a lovely phrase, or description which Rowan Williams wrote about communion.

“For Christians, to share in the Mass, the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, means to live as people who know that they are always guests – that they have been welcomed and that they are wanted. It is perhaps the most simple thing that we can say about Holy Communion. Jesus Christ tells us that he wants our company.” - Rowan Williams

Maybe the best way to describe All Saints day is to consider it as all those who have accepted that God wants their company – and wants us to share with one another.

The three passages we heard from the bible today try to capture a vision of the fullness of life, in this world and in the next. The saints, or our eschatology are not a quick fix end to death or pain. They do not take away our responsibility for living, but remind us that we each have a responsibility – even the vision in the book of Revelation of all things made new - is a vision of renewal not of escape.

The vision of Jesus is one that should call us to prayer – for the world and for one another. It is a vision that calls us to notice each other, and our neighbours and to know that we are all welcome at the table of God. It is intended to be for us both a vision of hope and an inspiration to our prayer. I hope as we celebrate today we

may be inspired by the Saints, but to also notice that we too have a Saints job to fulfil. Amen.