

Last weekend I was channel surfing and came across one of my favourite episodes of Doctor Who. The Matt Smith version of the Doctor takes his companion Amy to see the Van Gogh exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay; after which they visit Vincent in Provence. It is one of the most moving episodes of Doctor Who, and really touches on the fragility of life. Towards the end of the episode, the Doctor and Amy bring Vincent in the time machine back to the 2010 exhibit of the work, and the Doctor invites the curator to comment on how he rates the work of Vincent so that he can hear that he is not a failure.

Dr. Black: Well. Um, big question, um, but to me, Van Gogh is the finest painter of them all. Certainly the most popular great painter of all time. The most beloved. His command of colour, the most magnificent. He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty. Pain is easy to portray but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world. No one had ever done it before. Perhaps no one ever will again. To my mind, that strange wild man who roamed the fields of Provence, was not only the world's greatest artist but also one of the greatest men who ever lived.

Van Gogh: This changes everything. I'll step out tomorrow with my easel in hand. Although I still can't believe one of the haystacks was in the museum. How embarrassing¹.

I have seen this episode many times and I always end up crying – if Van Gogh had really heard this, would it have impacted on his depression enough for him to have a longer life?

If we could hear what people said about us in the future, would we live our lives differently. Would we be happier and more fulfilled?

The beatitudes, which is the Gospel reading we are listening to today from Matthew chapter 5 describes how those who face different situations are blessed. Blessed is not really a word in common usage anymore, but what if we reflected on this list of virtues as things that caused us to be happy. The beatitudes are almost a psalm and promise of happiness – not perfection – and not necessarily success – but still a reading of hope and happiness.

I have been helped in recent years by a commentary on the Beatitudes by *Susan Hulen* who points out how difficult the Greek word, *makarios*, which is central to the Beatitudes, is difficult to translate into English – even if it isn't a complicated word. 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 example may appear a bit unattainable to us.² A closer translation is “greatly honoured.” – but again this doesn't sound as connected to us as 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

¹ Dr Who Script – Series 5 – Vincent and the Doctor

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3453

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 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. It reminds of the phrase spoken of Van Gogh - *Pain is easy to portray but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world.*

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.³ We remember all show have had the ability to use their passion and pain to show the magnificence of God’s creation.

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. It is fundamentally the relationship with the creation in all its fullness.

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. (Like the image on the screen when we entered).

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, in a way that portrayed the wonder of God’s creation. 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

³ <http://www.churchyear.net/allsaints.html>

in this lifetime. Although they experience difficulty of many kinds, Jesus attributes a present-tense state of happiness to those he describes.

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. When I was watching Doctor Who last weekend, I wondered how we are inspired, whether by our imagination, or the kind words of others, whether it is the example of those who have been kind to us, or the ability of others to show us a glimpse of the world or each other, or our relationship with God.

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 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 – to recognise that God wants our company, and that we can share in times of joy and times of pain, the fullness of God's creation.

At a time when so many things seem complicated and painful, maybe the vision of being connected and wanted is one that may sustain us. Maybe in times such as these we need the promise of the beatitudes more than ever. For God, invites us into a relationship which is blessed and fulfilled, in the company of those who have gone before for us and are still to come. But most importantly, it helps us recognise that in both passion and pain we will find the magnificence of God's creation. This is the gift of the saints, that even in times such as these we are held, wanted and loved. Amen.