

## **All Saints' and All Souls' 2022 – Luke 6:20-31**

When we were your enemies, you loved us. When we rebelled against you, you died for us. You gave your life for us. Our Lord and our God. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate the Feasts of All Saints' and All Souls'. In today's Gospel reading Jesus sets out the central pillars of Christian living. It began with Luke's version of the Beatitudes, the blessings and woes, and finished with the command to love our enemies. But to understand the true gravity of this section of teaching, it is helpful for us to look at the wider context into which this teaching is set in the narrative of Luke's Gospel.

A few verses earlier starting at verse 12 of chapter 6, Luke details the calling of the 12 Apostles. We then hear of the crowds pressing in around him where many with infirmities were healed and those troubled with unclean spirits were cured.

Immediately after this Jesus lays out his teaching in the beatitudes and the requirement to love our enemies.

Then in verse 36 and 37, he tells his hearers to "be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not and you will not be judged. Condemn not and you will not be condemned."

Then, from Chapter 7, the narrative picks up pace. At verse 1, we hear of Jesus healing the Centurion's servant as a result of the Centurion's faith.

At verse 18, messengers arrive from John the Baptist and ask Jesus if he is "the one who is to come?" to which he replies, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who does not take offense at me."

As if to prove the point, we hear then of Jesus eating at the Pharisee's house where a sinful woman seeks him out and proceeds to wash his feet with her tears, dry them with her hair and anoint them with oil. Jesus proclaims to her that her sins have been forgiven, thus releasing her from her disgrace and bondage. Much to the incredulity of those present.

Chapter 8 begins with women whom Jesus has healed beginning to accompany him in his journey, together with the 12 Apostles. Then we

have the Parable of the Sower and the encouragement not to 'hide your lamp under a jar'. At Chapter 8 verse 22, Jesus calms the storm. Then at verse 26 he heals the Gerasene Demonic by driving the demon into the heard of swine, much to the annoyance of the pig farmers.

At verse 40, a woman who has been sick for 12 years touches his cloak and is healed as a result of her faith and Jesus brings the daughter of the leader of the synagogue back to life. And so ends a captivating sequence of events in Luke's Gospel. I encourage you to read Chapters 6 to 8 for yourselves.

But for now, let's turn back to today's reading Luke 6:20-31, and the beatitudes followed by the teaching to love our enemies. Luke depicts Jesus teaching the beatitudes, the blessings and the woes, in what is known as the sermon of the plain. It is Luke's equivalent of Mathew's sermon on the mount. Jesus must have preached this message multiple times. Wherever he went, he would focus upon the beatitudes, the blessings and woes.

Combine this with the teaching to love your enemies, which comes immediately afterwards, and there is something unique about Jesus' teaching here. When Jesus teaches these two things in parallel he is turning the inherited philosophy of privilege for the strongest and most powerful in society on its head. This was radical and different from what the world around him taught, but upon it stands not just the pillar of faith, but also the nature of the reward we are to find in heaven.

In our world today, I would hope that we would recognise mercy as a virtue. Nonetheless, we must understand that we live in a society shaped by 2000 years of Christian development which has led us to see mercy as a virtue. But we shouldn't take this for granted. It is a philosophy which can easily come under attack as the world lurches towards more primitive impulses of greed and self-gain at the expense of others. Graciousness, compassion and mercy are all virtues to be aspired towards. They hold some kind of honour, some kind of behaviour that is worth praising.

And yet, prior to Christianity, mercy was not considered to be a virtue at all. Indeed, in some cultures today it is still not considered a virtue. Even in our own society there are those pernicious forces that consider mercy to be a hinderance to the capitalist advance of personal gain.

Before Christianity, mercy was considered a weakness. Why would you ever allow someone to do something that challenged you, or annoyed you, or offended you, and allow them to get away with it? Why on earth would you ever forgive someone? Why would you try and understand your enemies unless you were forced to? Why would you pray for them or forgive them?

It doesn't make any sense at all, unless there is a higher law, a higher ideal.

In the Old Testament, we see that God is a god of justice. We need to pay what we owe and others need to pay us what they owe us.

In the New Testament, we see that justice is a stepping stone towards a yet higher call and that call is mercy. We see that God is a god of love and a god of mercy. He is a god who calls us to be merciful in his image.

If you ever wondered why Jesus, Christ the King, does not come on chariots of fire with a heavenly army to smite the Romans who are occupying his homeland, this is why. In Jesus, God reveals himself as a god of mercy, not revenge. His followers are called to exhibit the same. This is why the teachings of the beatitudes and loving your enemies are the first parts Jesus schools into the 12 Apostles, immediately after having called them. These are the central pillars of teaching to which every follower of Jesus, past and present, must strive.

Mercy is a really interesting word. In Latin it is *misericaordiae*, literally translated as 'where love meets our greatest need', or 'love meets us in our misery'. Mercy, then, is a love that we do not deserve. Mercy is when we need to be loved the most, but deserve it the least.

Jesus on the cross is that moment when humanity who put him there, you and I who put him there, deserves to receive the wrath of God in all his vengeance. Instead, God gives us forgiveness in his Son who leads us to eternal glory. That is the paradoxical awesomeness of our living God.

When we sometimes say in the words of our services, or hear other Christians declaring, that we are not worthy of God's love, this is what it means. The stories throughout the section we have explored in Luke's Gospel today, are stories of God's mercy seen in and through the real human person of Jesus Christ.

We are each made in God's love and in his image. But can we truly, hand on heart, ever say that we constantly, every hour of every day, achieve this level of compassion, mercy and graciousness? I fear not.

So, as we celebrate All Saints' and All Souls', and we hold before God our friends, family members and all those saintly persons now departed this life, how can we be sure they reside with God, or indeed that we will?

Well, the truth is, none of us are worthy of God's love, God's mercy. If worthiness were the measure, then which of us could make the grade? No, none of us are worthy of God's love and mercy, but we need it. And it is enough simply to recognise that we need it.

Just like the woman in the crowd who had enough faith and courage to touch Jesus' cloak in order to be healed by him, knowing we need God's love, God's mercy, and reaching out for it is enough.

Amen.