



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 7, 2010
The Solemnity of All Saints

Solemn Eucharist
at 11am

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend J. Anthony Fletcher

on
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17 and
Saint Matthew 5:1-12

+

ALL SAINTS-TIDE — WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB

Now I know that this is the day of the New York Marathon, so I just want to re-assure you that a preaching Marathon is not on the cards today. 26.2 minutes would try the rector's patience as well as yours.

When I am not here in New York, I usually live alone and so am fairly well acquainted with most aspects of domestic work. The washing machine on the whole is a faithful and loyal ally of mine. But I would never think of washing together my brand-new bright red shirt and my now filthy but once pristine white shirt. The result would be, at least, one red and one pink shirt. Now I know that there are wonder chemicals that prevent the colour of one item running into the others – but I don't trust them.

But here is a paradox – we are bringing our once squeaky-clean, but now soiled selves to our heavenly Father, for them to be washed in the crimson of the blood of the Lamb – of Christ. In wonder we see the blood of Christ as pure as it was before, but we have been washed and cleansed of our sins. Such is the picture that our second reading brings us on this Sunday in All Saints-tide.

This part of the Book of Revelation is the story of a vision of one disaster after another piling relentlessly on top of one another. It is the story of the Seven Seals, which seal the scroll, which only the Lamb of God is able to open.

As the Lamb opens the seals one by one disaster follows disaster. At the first seal the white horse appears and its rider is given a crown and is victorious, but at the second seal the red horse appears and its rider is given power to take away peace; at the third the black horse arrives and famine ensues; at the fourth the pale horse whose rider is death. So we have the four horsemen of the apocalypse. At the fifth we see the souls of the martyrs who are told to be patient until their number is complete. At the sixth earthquakes, the sun turns black and the stars fall from the sky.

The picture of disaster builds up to this point, with tension and horror increasing; and then it stops like some cliff-hanger episode on the TV where you have to wait until next week to know what has happened to your hero. John holds us there as the tension mounts and we wonder what on earth else can happen. As he keeps us there, he prepares to tell us that all is not lost for the faithful. An angel halts the damage that is being done to the land

and the sea, so as to be able to put a seal – a mark – on the foreheads of the servants of God; and he does this to 144,000 people. The number is symbolic, not to be taken literally. Twelve is the number of completeness – the twelve tribes of the Old Testament, the twelve apostles, they are multiplied together and then by a thousand to give a symbolically large figure. And then John describes the worship that takes place in heaven.

So we have looked at our passage from Revelation; we've sorted out some of its symbolism; we've put it in its context within the whole book and in doing so we have turned our backs on what is one of the most famous and popular passages in the whole of Scripture – the Beatitudes from Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount – today's Gospel reading.

The Beatitudes are, of course, wonderful and sublime. My earliest memory of them was rather more pedestrian – I remember being paid six pence at school at the age of about nine for being the first in the class to learn them by heart.

They fit with the Revelation story because they are the Rule of Life that the Christians were trying to keep, and the reward for keeping them is to be numbered amongst the 144,000.

For us Christians living in the 21st century the Beatitudes still provide us with a Rule of Life. If we are making an act of preparation before Sunday church or before communion or before going to confession, they provide an admirable summary of what our Christian lives should look like. Our passage from Revelation on the other hand provides us with a poetic picture of what we may look forward to. In dealing with this, the last book of the New Testament, it probably helps if we like things such as Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' or C.S. Lewis' 'Narnia' books or even Dante's 'Divine Comedy'. They all require us to look beyond the natural or the mundane and to embrace the world of fantasy and imagery. That does, of course, not mean that they are not true, but that they are not earthbound and historically factual.

The Book of Revelation was written at a time when the early Church was experiencing a wave of persecution. But the persecution of the Church has not been limited to those far off days. It is said that more Christians were martyred for the faith in the Twentieth century than in all the centuries before; and they have been all sorts and conditions of people from peasant farmers to archbishops.

One of those that has always appealed to me as a priest was the story of Father Vivian Redlich. He was an English Anglican missionary in New Guinea – that's just up above Australia – at the time of the Second World War. The Japanese army invaded the island and were seeking all foreigners. So Father Redlich knew that his life was in danger. Eventually it was reported to him that the enemy was in the next village and he was told that he must leave. But the next day was Sunday and he naturally wanted to say mass for his people before leaving. This he did as dawn broke. But the Japanese arrived sooner than expected – just after the service. Fr Redlich was captured and executed, there and then, on the beach. His example of faithfulness and commitment to his people has always appealed to me and there has remained the thought in the back of my mind, would I have had the courage and the commitment and the selflessness to have done the same. At the heart of a saintly life there is love and there is perseverance and there is commitment.

We, of course, never really know until the challenge is made and we are faced with the choice, what we are capable of. We are all called to be saints, but there are many different ways of achieving this. Martyrs are not the only saints – they may be the most dramatic – but others who have stood firm in their faith and have died a peaceful, natural death are just as important. None of these – martyrs or confessors – were saints when they were born. They

had the same temptations and limitations that you and I have, the same weaknesses and appetites, but out of their ordinariness and their sinfulness, they have, through the grace of God, become extra-ordinary. It is not enough to sit around and wait till we go to glory, Jesus calls us to live an active life of self-giving love.

We know the names of the saints that are remembered year by year in the Church's calendar and we know something of their lives, although sometimes our knowledge is very sketchy, but we don't know the many, many more who are unknown to us, but are held close to the heart of God. It is the whole company of heaven that we thank God for today and ask their prayers that they may be an inspiration to us as we seek in our faltering way to follow the path that Christ has set us. We are all called to be saints and we all need to pray that at the judgement to come, we may be amongst the blessed company from every nation and from all tribes and peoples and tongues whose lives have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, that with them we may be brought to the heavenly throne at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.