

Sunday 1st November – All Saints

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Many people are of the impression that Christianity is just about being nice to each other. That it's about putting in the effort to live according to a certain set of rules and, if we manage that, then we will get a reward of some kind from God.

Even many Christians take this view. That God's love can be earned if we live good lives. That if we follow the teaching of Jesus – as outlined in things like today's reading – the beatitudes – and the rest of what we call the Sermon on the Mount in the subsequent chapters of Matthew's gospel – we receive the love from God that we think we deserve. The trouble with that understanding of things is where it leaves us when we realise that we are not able to live good lives, that we always mess things up. How then can we possibly earn God's love?

But what Jesus is saying in these verses goes much deeper and stretches much further than just being nice to each other and living a 'good' life. And I want to think a bit about that this morning.

Jesus is talking about life in the Kingdom of God. He is giving us a vision of the future. A manifesto of what life in the Kingdom of God will be like. The Kingdom of God is not a physical place but is wherever and whenever God's authority, his rule is accepted; wherever God is loved and worshipped.

And Jesus is saying that in this new future – the Kingdom of God - this is what life would be like.

It will be wonderful news for those who are poor in spirit; those who mourn; those who are meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers and the persecuted. The Kingdom of God is marked by a completely different set of values to the world as we currently know it.

This is how it will be – and how it is in places and at times even now – this is how it will be in God's new economy.

And how different this vision of the Kingdom is from the world in which we live. A world of selfishness, of greed. An uncaring world where might is right, forgiveness and compromise are wrong and where the over confident and brash triumph over the quiet and unassuming. A world which seems to have no absolute truth guiding morality, but where everyone is out for what they can get. A world where it's OK to use and abuse people, and where the end justifies the means.

But when is this future going to be? How long do we have to wait?

The standard answer – and perhaps the one we would come up with if asked or pushed on this – is that this is what it will be like in Heaven. This current world is the world of pain and selfishness and greed and all those other things. The world to come is the world that Jesus is talking about. Pie in the sky when you die if you like

But to read it in that way cannot be right.

The amazing truth is that this kind of life isn't just wishful thinking. The thrust of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God is that this kind of life can be lived now. This upside down set of values can be lived out now when and where people are in relationship with God.

And we shouldn't be surprised at this. I wonder how many times you've prayed the Lords Prayer, with the line *Your Kingdom Come, your will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.*

We pray for God's kingdom to come ON EARTH, God's rule to be ON EARTH – as it is in heaven. Yet often we live as those who believe it will only happen in heaven – not in the here and now of the mess and the mire of this world.

What Jesus is actually about is announcing that the Kingdom of God is here amongst us. Not fully revealed, but it is here amongst us and we can see and experience foretastes of it now.

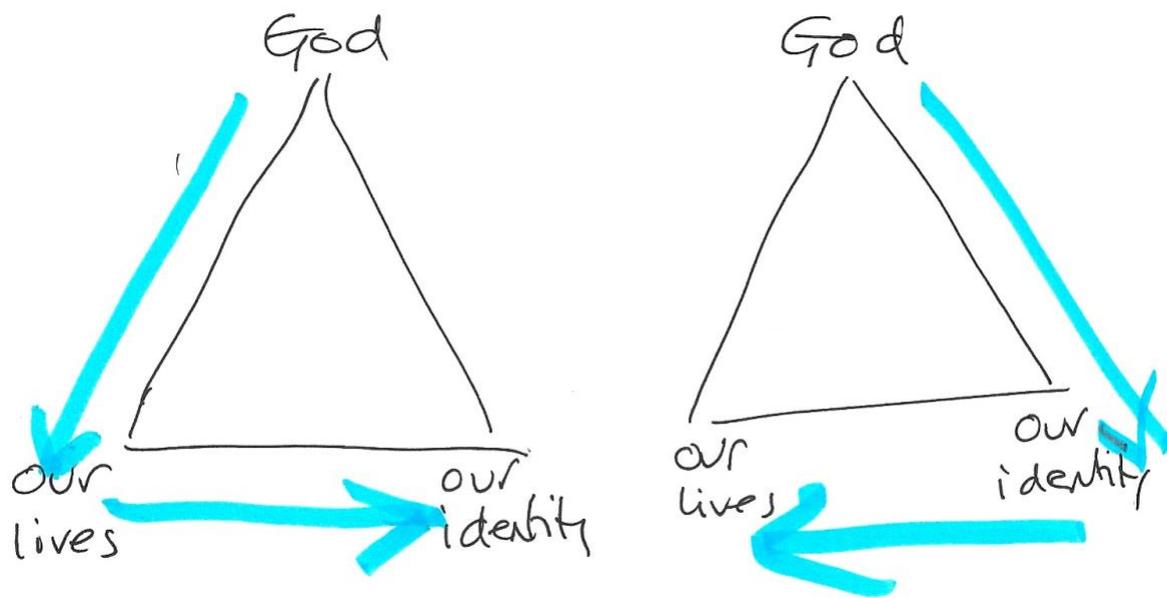
All through the gospels we read – the kingdom of God is among you; you are not far from the Kingdom of God. True now as it was then.

In the beatitudes, in the sermon on the mount Jesus is challenging people to live now in the ways that will make full sense in this future that God has promised – because that future is breaking into the present in the person of Jesus. And Jesus goes on to say that these "Kingdom lives" can only be lived once we accept the love and rule and authority of God.

This is so important. What we were talking about earlier was the myth that obedience to God's rules leads to being loved by God. Jesus is saying that's all the wrong way round. You can never earn your way to God. It has to be accepting God's love first. Accepting that even though we are messed up human beings, God still loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. Only then – secure in the love of God - can we live these Kingdom lives. Only then can we be part of this new way of living.

It may help to picture this in terms of a triangle with God at the top, and at the bottom one corner being our lives and the other our identity – our relationship with God.

It's tempting to move around this anticlockwise – with what we do determining our relationship with God. And as we have seen, we can never live lives that enable us to earn us our identity as children of God. But move around the triangle clockwise and we see that being sure of who we are – our identity as children of God – enables us to live Kingdom lives.



And that's what ties these thoughts into All Saints Day which we are celebrating today.

When we think of saints who have gone before us. Saints – not so much the famous ones, but the ordinary saints or Christians who have striven to live lives pleasing to God; lives which are based on the vision Jesus offers; lives they have dared to live according to the ways of the Kingdom rather than the ways of the world. But lives which have come out of their relationship with God, their faith in him and their acceptance of his unconditional love for them.

And as an inspiration for us to live Kingdom lives, we can learn and be encouraged and inspired by the faith and the lives of those who have gone before us. Perhaps people we have heard of, whose stories we know of, but much better people we have met and whom we have known personally and whose stories are part of ours.

For me my mind goes to some of these saints – some of whom have died, others still very much alive and living Kingdom lives today.

- *Rose from East London – mixed race marriage in the 1960s when it was much harder than now; widowed young and bringing up 4 children on her own – but with the support of the church. (From And can it be - I rose went forth and followed thee)*
- *A lady I know who has an amazing ability to see the presence and love of God in the most distressing of situations – and her grace as her (now deceased) much loved husband suffered from dementia and barely recognized her*
- *Sam – a teenager I knew a few years ago who was diagnosed with cancer, bravely faced up to the op and started raising funds for a teenage cancer charity*

- *Alice– diagnosed with leukemia when she was 18, spent 3 years in and out of hospital while studying for a degree then went to Jordan doing Christian work and is now working with refugees in the North of England. And her family for the way they coped and supported her through it all.*
- *Michael who spent much time with me when I was going through a hard time; listening to me, encouraging me and praying for me. Who had faith in me when it seemed no one else did*
- *Nellie – my great Aunt. In my late teens I told her I had become a Christian and she shared joyfully with me how every day of her adult life (and she was in her late 70s then) she had prayed that someone else in the family would become a Christian.*

And I am inspired by these people and others – and who knows one day by God’s grace I might be that inspiration to others.

So on this All Saints Day, as we remember and praise God for all the saints – let us also try to follow their example. Let us accept the love God offers to us and, secure in that love live lives which are based on Kingdom values, rather than earthly values.

Let us be courageous and dare to become part of the Kingdom now, in trust that it will be more and more evident for others to see in the world around us.

Its not going to be easy. But we have been promised the Spirit of God to help us and guide us. It won’t change the world immediately – but we can trust that God has promised that this is his future – partially revealed now.

It won’t necessarily make us friends – Jesus never promised popularity. But it certainly won’t be boring. And nor will it be just about being nice to each other.

But in doing so we become part of the answer to our own prayer - *Your Kingdom come, Your will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.* We will begin to see the Kingdom established in us and around us.