

**Morningside      Sermon      10.30am      1/11/20**

**Laughter and Tears      All Saints**

*Matthew 5:1-12*

A few years ago, the iconic children's TV programme presenter Fred Rogers came to Morningside. To generations of American children, 'Mister Rogers Neighborhood' was the half hour educational children's programme they all watched. It was like a mixture of Play School and Blue Peter, doing some crafts, but also tackling issues around well-being, loneliness, sibling rivalry, bullying, bereavement, and taking care of people around you. Fred was also an ordained Presbyterian minister, and I met him through a mutual friend who brought Fred to our church some years ago.

In 1997 Fred Rogers was awarded a Lifetime Achievements Award at the Emmys. In his acceptance speech he said this:

*"So many people have helped me to come to this night: some of you are here; some are far away; some are even in heaven. All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you to become who you are. Those who have cared about you, and wanted what was best for you in life. Ten seconds of silence...I'll watch the time!*

*Whomever you've been thinking about, how pleased they must be to know the difference you feel they've made."*

This is the Christian season of All Saints, as well as the season of Remembrance. A time for many to think back and remember the people whose lives and example, and sometimes sacrifice, have 'loved us into being'. People who were real saints. Not looking like they have soup plates stuck on the back of their heads (which is what I thought halos were when I was a child); not looking wistfully upwards to heaven, wringing their hands in spiritual anguish; but real saints: sleeves rolled up and ready for action saints; saints not trapped in stained glass but found in the often monochrome walks of life performing acts of kindness by stealth.

Saints are the kind of people in our lives who either say the word, 'Blessed', or more often than not live out the word, 'Blessed' in and around our lives. Saints are the people who bless us by their kindness and by their presence in the happy times and in the sad times of our lives.

I look at our reading this morning, called the Beatitudes, the blessings, and reflect that the saints in our lives, past and present, are the ones who stand with us when we are poor in spirit, and point us to heaven; the ones who see us mourning, and comfort us; are the ones who see our meekness and insecurity, and offer us gifts of the earth; are the ones who see us hunger for fairness in life, and help us find ways to make a difference; are the ones who see our need of mercy, and show us what forgiveness looks like; are the ones who see our simple faith, and open our eyes to the presence of God all around; are the ones who see the turmoil in life, and bring the balm of peace and calm and breathing spaces; are the ones who see when we are set upon, or taken advantage of, or taken for granted, or treated unfairly, and offer us courage, and help us be determined, and put us back on our feet. Saints are the people who live out these blessing in our lives, and make them real to us and for us.

One of my old professors, James Whyte, asked in a sermon: "I want to ask a question – because it's one which keeps puzzling me. Is the last word in life laughter, or is it tears? Is it comedy or is it tragedy which comes nearest to the heart, the truth, of human existence. I was brought up to think that it was tragedy; I was taught at school, for instance, that Shakespeare's tragedies are greater plays than his comedies. Only now am I beginning to doubt that."<sup>i</sup>

I wonder if, in these difficult, upside down, unhappy times for many, with so much uncertainty in our world, with so much put on hold, or in danger of being washed away in a flood of tears which could be sorrow, or could be frustration, I wonder if when we look around for blessings and hope that we might look for the saints in our lives who stand with us when things are tough, and weep when we weep, and who also coax us into laughter when we need to break the cycle of sadness or bitterness, or powerlessness, or emptiness that so often is in danger of overwhelming our lives.

"In countries where freedom has been extinguished by tyranny, the only way the free spirit can express itself is by laughter and by making jokes. The joke is the only form of defiance."<sup>ii</sup> In J K

Rowling's Harry Potter books, she invents a creature called a Boggart, a shape-shifter that turns into anything it thinks will frighten people most. The thing that finishes off a Boggart is laughter. "What you need to do is force it to assume a shape you find amusing."<sup>iii</sup>

"The laughter of God on the other side of our pain, the other side of our tears. Laughter is not carelessness, but the deepest kind of caring. Such laughter is the foretaste of heaven."<sup>iv</sup> Saints, with their beatitudes, their blessings of laughter and love, give us a taste of heaven whilst we are here on earth.

The Beatitudes have been described as 'primarily (being) about the character of God...and...secondarily about the character of Christians...'<sup>v</sup> God's character is seen in the character of God's saints. Saints, like the Beatitudes, the blessings, look at the world as it is, and how it will be. "Blessed are...for they will be..." The future tense confesses that the world is not currently the way it ought to be, but some day, it will be! Saints, with their gift of blessing, stand with us in the present, and point us to a brighter future. Their energy and their focus encourages and enables us to stay positive. Staying positive doesn't mean you have to be happy all the time, it means that even on hard days you know that better days are coming.

I have spent time over this past week with people who in so many different ways are finding life hard. Big issues and small issues have clouded their living, and the world is dark. I heard a psychiatrist say recently that because of the time we are all living through many people, if not suffering from full-blown depression, are suffering from 'languishing depression'. Life sometimes feels empty, hollow, a shell. With languishing, there's a sense that things aren't quite right, but you can't quite put your finger on what is wrong.

Saints in our world turn Beatitudes, blessings, into reality. They help turn languishing into flourishing. They recognise our tears, and help us through them to laughter. We find ourselves helped into a better perspective on life, a more positive outlook that isn't ridiculously unrealistic, but is healthily optimistic, and focused, and sustainable. A life that brings a little bit of heaven and its future promise and realises it here on earth. And maybe helps us see, much to our surprise, that we are a blessing to others.

“In 1922, Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was a poor Macedonian twelve-year-old in a parochial school. In 1948 she was a thirty-eight year old principal of a Catholic high school in Calcutta. Who would have known that thirty-one years later she would be accepting the Nobel Peace Prize as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, or that fourteen years after that Pope John Paul II would beatify her as Saint Teresa?”<sup>vi</sup>

Laughter and tears. I think that phrase sums up what we are going through in these difficult days. Even in the darkness, light still shines. Even when there is pain, the promise of comfort remains. Even when the tears are not far away, a gentle saint comes into our life and we find ourselves laughing, unexpectedly.

Faith does not paper over the cracks in our life caused by grief, or illness, or frustration, or disappointment; but through life’s saints, people living out loud the blessings of God right now, we blink through and wipe away the tears, and laugh in defiance, in self-awareness, and in hope. And that is a blessing indeed.

### **In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

#### **Amen**

---

<sup>i</sup> James A Whyte, Laughter and Tears, p1

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p5

<sup>iii</sup> J K Rowling, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, p101

<sup>iv</sup> Whyte, p6

<sup>v</sup> Tim Beach-Verhey, Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 4, p238

<sup>vi</sup> Allen Hilton, Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 4 p241