Sunday 1 November 2026 **Liverpool Parish Church**
All Saints' Day

OT: Revelation 7:9-17
NT: 1 John 3:1-3
Gp: Matthew 5:1-12

At the end of every Sunday eucharist, the priest says a blessing. It's such a normal part of the service we might take it for granted. But it can be a hard thing to understand. What is a blessing? Why do we do it? What's going on when we give or receive one?

This touches on our gospel reading, because Jesus repeatedly says that certain groups of people are blessed. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, the grieving, the persecuted. These are words that have inspired and empowered people for two thousand years. So what do they mean?

The first thing to say is that blessing isn't something magical or mechanical. When we are blessed, our problems don't just disappear. We don't suddenly become wealthy or popular or successful, or however else we define happiness. Blessing is not a spell which grants long life and protection.

So: what *does* a blessing do?

It names something: a person, a place, a thing. It marks it out as a gift of God's creation, an object of God's love and a channel of God's grace. Truly, blessing is God's gift first before anything else: we can only reflect and respond to that gift. It is God bringing life into being, delighting in it and saying: it is very good.

So when we give or receive a blessing we're reminded of this grace already given to us. But blessing also makes a *difference*. By naming God's gift, it makes it present, makes it come alive in a new way.

The blessing tells us who we are and who we are called to be. Think about how, in baptism, we bless the water and the child, and the child receives their name as a sign of being known and loved by God. As our reading from the first letter of John says, 'Beloved, we are God's children now'. That's an extraordinary thing to hear. We are God's children *now*. We don't have to do anything to have that blessing. It's who we really are. But hearing it matters. It makes all the difference in the world for people to tell us, in words or deeds, that they love us and care for us, that we matter. Love, friendship and solidarity need to be named. Only when they are named are they deepened and strengthened.

This is what Jesus does: he names those who are blessed and so he lifts them up. And the striking thing is just how deeply counter-cultural his blessings are.

I said earlier that a blessing doesn't magically make you happy. But it is linked to happiness: after all, we are created to enjoy life, to live a life that is as full and rich as possible. The problem is we have such distorted ideas of happiness and it is distributed so unequally. In the Greek cultural world of the gospels, happiness was conditional. It depended a great deal on relative wealth and ease. The good life, the happy life, was one in which there were resources and education and leisure and freedom. That sounds reasonable: but the reality was that the people who had access to such goods were limited. Slaves, the poor, women, certain barbarian races – none of these could enjoy happiness in the fullest sense. And often being blessed was associated with power, conquest, overcoming rivals. The most blessed life was that of the emperor, who was virtually a god on earth.

What a contrast with the blessings Jesus names. Here it is the marginalised, the ones who lack power, fortune and prestige who are blessed. It is the ones who shudder with grief, who struggle to make peace in violent times, who are merciful when the world wants us to be winners, who stay faithful even when the world's powers try to batter and silence them, who see clearly and do not let their heart become clogged by false and self-serving dreams. In blessing these people, Jesus makes us see the world differently. God's ways are not ours. Those the world has pegged as miserable losers are the ones living the kingdom way. For God's kingdom is not a territory in this world. It is unfeigned love, joy and peace in the Spirit.

This is the message of the book of Revelation, our first reading. It is a book written at a time of persecution, when mad emperors like Nero used their power to crush those who dissented from the empire's creeds. In the eyes of the world, Christians were deviants, atheists, traitors, subversives. They were sure to die off at the hands of Rome. The Book of Revelation tells a different story: it pulls back the curtain to show a numberless host of saints and martyrs. It is their nonviolent dissent which offers a path to the kingdom, not the empire's legions.

At the heart of the vision of Revelation is Christ, who appears, not as a lion or a dragon but as a slaughtered Lamb. Christ who shows that the beginning and end of all things is this self-giving love, and not the endless cycle of violence.

In the end, is it God in Christ who blesses us, who gives us a name the world cannot give. It is the Crucified God, not the God of empire, from whom all blessings flow. The God who shares in all of our poverty, pain and grief, shares even the bitter taste of defeat and death – and so opens the way to a true blessedness.

The letter to John says that we, the beloved, are God's children now. That is the root of the assurance we have that we are already blessed. But it is not the end of the story, for the author goes on: 'what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.'

Blessed are the pure in heart - those who see clearly - for they will see God. The fullness of blessing is not wealth and success. It is to be like Christ, the one whose name and meaning are Love, the one whose name we bear as Christians.

Blessing tells us who we are: God's beloved children. Blessing also invites us to walk with him who shows us what it means to be God's beloved child. He frees us from the idols of success, the powers of shame and cruelty. He calls us to be our fullest selves, in peacemaking, humility. mercy and courageous hope.

This is the path of sainthood to which we are all called. We walk it in communion with the saints from every age and tribe and tongue on earth. Like us they are a motley crew. But each one of them shows us a glimpse of what it is to be a beloved child of God and grow into the likeness of Christ. With them, may we always say: 'blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'.

Fr Steven Shakespeare