

Scripture notes – Feast of All Saints – 1st November 2026

The saints we celebrate today are not just the ones who have been officially canonised but ‘all’ those who have gone to God’s presence after death.

Revelation / Apocalypse 7:2-4, 9-14

The Greek word ‘apocalypse’ means ‘Revelation’ – meaning the ‘unveiling’ of secrets. ‘Apocalyptic’ is a word used by scholars to describe a kind of writing popular around the time of Jesus, but which has since dropped out of use – making it hard for modern people to understand. The message in apocalyptic writings is always one of encouragement for Jews or Christians living in difficult times, often under persecution. It assures them that God is in control, despite all hardships, and they will come out victorious in the end. It threatens punishment for persecutors or those opposing God showing that their power is limited and will not last. The style is often bizarre with visions, appearance of heavenly beings, monsters and many symbolic elements; perhaps modern fantasy and science fiction are our closest literary parallels. The reading today does not have many such oddities, but the message of hope is conveyed symbolically and this is not meant to be a description of what heaven is ‘really like’.

The author has named himself as ‘John’ at the beginning, and again in our selection, but which John of the Bible or history is not certain. He describes a vision, which is probably a literary invention, as often in apocalyptic accounts. In face of threat of coming punishment ‘devastating the land’, John hears of a pause to tell of those who will be saved from destruction. It begins with all the twelve tribes of Israel, the chosen people of the Old Testament; these verses are omitted in our selection but a good reminder that Jews are among our saints. The number 12 is symbolic in the Bible.

Next come a gathering from all other parts of the world, and this is a number ‘no one could number’. This fits today’s feast: there are countless saints we celebrate, most of whose lives are unknown to history but which we also want to celebrate. (We can think of our departed family and friends as among them.) This book often uses liturgical language picturing heaven as a grander version of a human regal court, with God the Father seated on a high throne and various attendants all around. The ‘Lamb’ is Jesus, the name taken from the words of John the Baptist, which are also in our mass: ‘Behold, the Lamb of God’. ‘The Lamb’ is a major player in this book, although Jesus also appears in human form. White robes were often given to the newly baptised; here we have the startling image of clothes washed white in blood, symbolic of the death of Jesus through which we rise to the new life in the sacrament of baptism. The palms they carry are a sign of victory and often used in art to point out martyrs.

The times we live in are as dangerous and frightening all around the globe as those of the Roman persecution at the time when John was writing – with famines, outbreaks of war and violence and the effects of climate change, so the message of trust and encouragement is as pertinent today as it was when this was written. Although Revelation can be a puzzling book to read, there are a number of consoling and inspiring passages, meant to encourage all those who hold to Christ, even under persecution.

Psalm 23/24 1-6

The psalm with its view of those who ‘stand in the holy place’ and are rewarded with the vision of God can hardly be bettered for celebrating ‘all the saints’.

1 John 3:1-3

This letter shows close resemblances to the gospel of John, but may have been written by a different author of the ‘school’ of John the evangelist. The theme in this Letter is love, both the love ‘lavished’ on us by God and the love we respond with, as followers of Jesus loving God, loving others. The saints we celebrate are examples of ‘God’s children’ who see God ‘as he really is.’ John here is writing to the living, for all of us are also called to be ‘saints’ and join the throngs of those in heaven, as in the first reading.

Matthew 5:1-12

These are some of the most familiar Bible verses. In terms of today’s feast, they describe those who have lived according to Jesus’ picture of those who

belong to the Dominion or Kingdom of Heaven. The form of the eight blessings is a carefully constructed hymn in Hebrew poetry. (The last lines are not part of that poem, but added because their theme of martyrdom fits with the 8th description.) These are often called the 'Beatitudes' from the Latin word used to translate the Greek makairos which opens every line of the poem. This is not so easy to translate into English, as our words have differing connotations; 'blessed' and 'congratulations' have been used but probably the best choice is 'happy' or 'how happy'.

Because the words are familiar, we may not reflect on the radical nature of what the Kingdom of Heaven is. The 'poor' include those in daily poverty, unable to even scrape a living and reduced to begging, and 'in spirit' also means 'having no righteousness of our own' (St Paul) but relying on God for every grace. The 'gentle' turn us from how we relate to God, to how we relate to other people – not selfishly, but considering others and their needs. Those who mourn may have personal losses, but the idea also includes 'mourning' over the pain and wickedness of the world around us, and that leads to 'hungering and thirsting' that all may be put right, in our lives and for everyone in the world. While we need to be aware of wrongdoing, our response to sinners should be not to condemn, but show the mercy that God has shown us. One aspect of this is 'making peace' – seeking reconciliation, acting non-violently. The Hebrew idea of 'peace' takes in more than absence of war, and includes general well-being and happiness.

'Pure in heart' meant more than the outward 'ritual' purity of the old Law', and can also be taken as 'singleness of mind' – those who are attentive to God and not distracted by selfishness or 'cares of the world' (Matthew 13:22). History has shown that those who live by these guidelines will not always be welcomed, but if persecution comes for that reason, that is something to be 'happy' about. All the rewards promised seem both for this life – we are to recognize our deep happiness if we live in this way – but also expect the final fulfilment of life everlasting, among the saints of our feast today. The last line echoes the first, indicating the end of the poem.

Joan Griffith

Suggestions for prayer or reflection

Traditional Catholic teaching speaks of 'the communion of saints'. What do I believe about those who have died and gone before us – whether saints or my own loved ones? Do I feel they still play a part in my life, my heart, my prayer? Do I see saints as examples to follow, or as people too great to imitate? Are they people I feel I have some kind of current personal

connection to? Or are they like admired historical characters, important but not someone I have a relationship with?

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