All Saints – the Beatitudes, spiritual treasure and a source book for life

I breathe a sigh of relief that we escaped Halloween with its trick and treat ruse for extracting cash. I don't think it was ever meant to be like that, but I'm told its origin was part of the celebration of the Feast of All Saints. When you think about it, the church has always had a remarkable number of very remarkable people. We like to hear of their exploits in advancing the Christian story and this is a right and proper thing to do.

There was a time in history when people couldn't read, and much teaching was done pictorially. That is why we are careful to preserve the wall paintings and stained- glass windows in medieval churches, which describe the activities of our Christian forbears. It is why in the two centuries before this one, the church encouraged the collection of stories about saints, and how they put the teaching of our Lord into action. These books were extremely popular with parishioners who didn't have a lot of time, but wanted to know more about ways in which the faith was spread and encouraged by the activities of ordinary men and women. ‘The Lives of the Saints’ was a bestseller and could be found on the bookshelves of many homes. I have a strong recollection that I was given a copy of this book when I was confirmed. I wish I still had it, as there are so many stories that can be told with confidence and so many other references to the courage and bravery of Christians who lived their lives under persecution or in slavery. They might be very helpful to all those today who live in poor conditions and in dire poverty.

I notice how Matthew gave a high priority to Jesus’ teaching of what is now called ‘the Beatitudes’. Beatitude means blessed and of course these attitudes or ways of Christian living, as taught by our Lord, all begin with the word ‘blessed’. St.Matthew tells us that Jesus was being followed by a very large crowd, but he wanted to instruct his disciples privately. So they climbed higher up the mountain, leaving the crowd lower down. When Jesus found a good spot, He drew the disciples together and taught them. Each lesson begins with the word ‘blessed’.

Now I often think that a careless reading of the Beatitudes could easily give the wrong impression. Jesus is not suggesting that his friends should be an easy push over. They are not to be meek and mild, scared to speak out what they believe, and too ready to be afraid of the truth. For example, he says, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” That can seem to be an invitation to be quiet, to hold back, and not to push forward. But that is not meekness. Rather it is weakness. The meek person will join in the discussion and put forward his view strongly but not aggressively. What he says will be heard. It has real meaning for all but it's open for discussion, although the person who presents it believes strongly in what he says. Meekness is the quiet platform from which things are said strongly and urgently. Meekness can often convince and have a strong effect on others.

Of course, Jesus underscores the other side when he talks about the Christian attitude to those who scorn the person who is doing his best to follow our Lord’s teaching and live what is sometimes called ‘the good life’. It is hard to be mocked for what you believe in passionately, but to see Christian people standing firm and making a strong defence when people of religious belief are attacked and regarded as fair game, makes a big impression on the bystander who perhaps can't make up his mind, but hops from one leg to the other  A bit of strong conviction can go a long way in the making of new Christians.

It was this very week that I was asked about the poor in spirit. My questioner looked me in the face and said you look in poor spirits today. I had to admit he was right in that many things had gone wrong, and I was in low water. I immediately thought of the beatitude, and my old blind friend who was my spiritual guide and director for 30
years. He was a very practical person and many times he said to me that you can't be on the top line all the while. But you can be certain that if you wait quietly your spirit will come again, it will revive and the drive or whatever it is that you're missing will be back. That sounded too easy, too simple for words: but, time and time again, it proved to be true. A few minutes resting in the presence of God, or sensing that the spirit of the Lord Jesus is always near and with us, is his way of Iifting us back to where we want to be. Blessed are the poor in spirit, says Jesus. He knows we give out so much, we need time to recover, to recharge, and to feed in again to what we were doing. My blind friend was a wonderful example of that way of renewing a tired spirit and a poor spirit.

It may be a long time since you rehearsed the Beatitudes in school, whether with a group or standing in front of the class or form. But give it a thought. Just a few moments of recollection and the spirit within begins to well up and be fortified once more. So Jesus gave his friends all the advice they needed. The Beatitudes were his source book for the Christian life - a few simple verses worth reading again and again. Ponder them and you will always find some spiritual treasure!