10am Sunday 1st November – All Saints Day
Rev 7:9-end, 1 John 3:1-3, Matt 5:1-12 – ***who are the saints?***

Today is All Saints' Day, which is a good day to ask the question: ***who are the saints?***
And our readings today help us to answer that question.

And our readings also help us to understand how three seemingly-inconsistent things can all be true. Because they help us to see how it is possible to be looking forward to being a saint, whilst we might at the same time be becoming a saint, and also at the same time actually being a saint.

In the reading from Revelation, the saints are the people robed in white. There's no point in asking how many there are, because it is such a great multitude that no one could count it, and yet it is ***from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.*** So it doesn't matter how you might divide people up, every possible background is represented here: national, social, political and cultural. These are people who are as different from one another as any group of people that we can ever imagine.

And yet, although they are as diverse as they possibly can be, the people are all, every single one of them, ***robed in white***. Their robes have been ***washed … and made … white in the blood of the Lamb***. The Lamb is, of course, Jesus.

We can speculate about why the colour of their robes would be white – remembering, perhaps, that at the Transfiguration Jesus' clothes ***became dazzlingly white***. But surely, the point is that it is because of ***the blood of the Lamb*** that their robes are all the same colour. What these people all share is that they've been transformed by the blood of Jesus; the blood which on the cross, as we will hear in our prayers when we come to communion, was ***shed for us and for many for the forgiveness of sins***.

John, who is writing down this vision, is told that these people ***have come out of the great ordeal***. There's a traditional understanding of saints which assumes that it is impossible to be saint unless you've endured a spectacularly gruelling death. The Catherine wheels that will be lit next week take their name from the instrument of torture by which Catherine of Alexandria was martyred. But the Greek word that is here translated as "ordeal" is the same word used for grinding or milling. Maybe that implies that the ongoing pressures of living as a saint are just as much a preparation for being in heaven as an extremely gruesome death. So martyrdom isn't an essential qualification for being a saint.

John writes that the saints all speak with one voice: they know that ***salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb***. The saints are a community enjoy who a relationship with the one who is ***our God***, and they sing as one, and ***in a loud voice***, with all the confidence that comes of knowing that you are exactly where you belong.

And rightly so, for there is now no limit on their worship of God. They are in the presence of God and they can worship him ***day and night***. And they know that God ***will shelter them***. Nothing can harm them or hurt them, and God will meet their deepest needs. They are able to enjoy safety and security because the Lamb ***will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of the water of life.*** Whatever has happened in the past to cause them grief or sorrow can be forgotten, because ***God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.***

You might be thinking – well that all sounds good, assuming that I get to heaven, but what about the here and now? You might be thinking, I'm sorry, I just can't identify with that imagery of people dressed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, permanently worshipping. That's not me. I'm not at all sure that that's how I would want to spend eternity. I can't see myself in that company, so maybe I'm not cut out to be a saint, after all.

And that's where our other readings can help us.

The same John who wrote down that vision of heaven also wrote the letter in which he writes about how the love that the Father has given us means that ***we are God's children now***. But John also writes that ***what we will be has not yet been revealed.***

John says it will be when we see Jesus that ***we will be like him***. Paul too, writing to the Corinthians, writes that we are all ***being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.***

Putting our trust in Jesus and his death on the cross makes us God's children. We are ***heirs according to the promise… because we belong to Christ***. That means that we can look forward to being changed, until we will be not just *ready* to be in heaven, but *eager* and *excited* to be in heaven. And all of this through the work of the Holy Spirit. All that is required of us is to allow the Holy Spirit to change us.

Just as we wouldn't want to turn up to a wedding in our gardening clothes, so we wouldn't want to arrive in heaven just as we are now. I'm sure everybody here can think of bits of us that aren't quite fit for heaven yet. Perhaps it's an unruly temper, or a partiality to gossip, or an insistence on hanging on to an old grievance. If we are honest with ourselves, we probably know what we would like the Holy Spirit to help us to change about ourselves.

And that's where our gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount gives us comfort. That list of virtues – being merciful, being pure in heart, being a peacemaker – you might think that they really don't sound like you. And you're probably right. But that's not the point. Jesus is saying that although our world isn't like this now, and we aren't like this now, with the help of the Holy Spirit we can become people who will ***hunger and thirst for*** righteousness; people who will ***be merciful*** and who will be ***pure in heart***, and who will be ***peacemakers.***

When we have put our trust in Jesus and have decided to follow him, that work of renewal can begin in us, gradually transforming our hearts and our minds until eventually we will want nothing more than to be singing in heaven ***salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb***.

We might be feeling, today, that we are not good enough, or holy enough to be saints. But in that respect, we're no different from the people of the early church, and Paul was completely clear, even when he was being quite critical about his listeners, that he was writing to the saints.

We might not feel like saints, but we are all saints, and by the Holy Spirit we can become more and more like the saints that we will be when we are in heaven.