

## WHERE DO WE LIVE?

### All Saints 2014, Year A: Rev. 7:9-17; 1 Jn. 3:1-3; Mt. 5:1-12

I don't know how many years ago it was that I became aware that where we live has nothing to do with a physical location and everything to do with how we construct reality; that although we may share our living space with others, have a close family, work in groups or as part of team, be immersed in our community or in a number of communities within the community, although we share much in common and have great affinity with those around us, everyone's life is a little different from everyone else's; we each have our own unique place in our own unique universe; and that no matter how earthbound humans are and how firmly we plant our feet on the ground, we actually live in dimensions of thought and perception, in ideas and insights, in feelings and affections, and in hopes and dreams. We may be fully committed to living in our bodies, devoting several hours of each day to body strength, body fitness, and body health; we may be physically active, enjoy and even excel in a great number of physical activities and sports – but, in the end, it is how we grasp and tie up the threads of experience that determine our contentment and security or the lack thereof.

A few years ago I spent some time with a young couple who had come to Canada from Ghana for university. They desperately wanted to return to Ghana because they could live more authentically in a culture that was their own: they understood Canadian culture and values, but they had not appropriated them. They said, "Here we are in Canada; we are employed, live in comfort, and now have a young family born on Canadian soil. We are well off and have good jobs, but we are unhappy. In Ghana, we were poor, but we didn't even know that we were poor, because we were happy. You don't have to be rich to be happy. In fact, we've found that having enough money doesn't make you happy. People in Canada are concerned about how poor everyone is the Developing World. What they don't understand, is that we are happy!" They knew that they needed to return to Africa; that Canada was not their home. They were not living in a place that they could recognize as home. I knew what they meant, not because I don't feel at home in Canada, but because there have been times and places in my life when I have felt very much alone, alienated, disconnected. What this young couple was describing to me was familiar, even though I could only imagine or read about life in Ghana and how different it is from life in Canada.

We often speak of "finding home" or wanting to "feel at home." We may have moved into a new house, a new neighbourhood, or a new city or country. We may have changed jobs or schools or churches. Many times things beyond our control change around us and we become emotionally disoriented. "Life will never be the same," we may hear ourselves say. And yet, even in that acknowledgment we recognize as the truth – that life is always changing – we long for enough familiarity and sufficient equilibrium to be able to move ahead and not be stuck in this uncomfortable place, this place that is not home.

Two of our three readings this morning were born in a time of considerable suffering and alienation, a time that felt like anything but home.

The community reflected in the Book of Revelation is the Christian community that existed at the time of what is called the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans which took place between the years of 66 and 73. Christians were caught in the crossfire, so to speak, and were *persona non grata* in Palestine and in other parts of the Roman Empire. Revelation mentions the martyrdom of a disciple named Antipas, who like others was "slaughtered for the word of God and the testimony [he] had given." The author of Revelation himself went into exile on the Island of Patmos, a small Greek island on the Aegean Sea. It was there, in the final years of the first century, that he had the visions he records. He, himself, writes that he was exiled because of "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

Revelation is a violent book, filled with suffering and conflict which, in John's hands, takes on a cosmic dimension and draws on other eras of persecution recorded in Hebrew scripture in order to accrue meaning for his readers in "the seven churches that are in Asia" – churches that were located in what is now Turkey. But in the middle of all the storm and stress, John of Patmos (named for his place of exile) has a vision of hope, part of which we read this morning as our First Reading. It is a vision of God enthroned and of Jesus identified as the Lamb. It is a vision of a great multitude of those who have survived the turmoil of the end-times. There are so many that they are beyond counting. They are the redeemed, and have been victorious because of the sacrifice of the Lamb, the crucifixion and resurrection

of Jesus, in other words. And they now stand before the throne of God and of the Lamb in perpetual worship with the angels and the elders singing “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.” We sang essentially the same hymn this morning as our Hymn of Praise.

The passage speaks of the end of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom; of a time when good has vanquished evil; and the death and resurrection of Christ is not only a sign of the victory, it is the victory itself that is acknowledged and celebrated in the Book of Revelation.

Where did the people in John’s seven churches live? Their environment was hostile, but through the encouragement present in their community of faith, they lived in solidarity with Christ Jesus, and were able to take for themselves the promise and power of his resurrection. Through John’s vision, they understood themselves as among the redeemed, gathered in victory in the heaven of God’s eternal presence. They lived in the here and in the hereafter; they were, at one and the same time, among the persecuted in the Roman Empire and citizens of heaven. Faith transformed their present suffering into a living hope.

Jesus’ community and Matthew’s community were also no strangers to oppression and persecution. And so it is that the first words from Jesus’ mouth when he gathers his disciples and followers in today’s Gospel address their feelings of vulnerability. They were living with doubt and uncertainty, in poverty, in grief; some were persecuted; all had had some experience of oppression. And Jesus, whose own suffering had called him into solidarity with these poor, speaks of blessing, kinship with the prophets who came before them, and the powerful love of God that will not let them perish. In fact, they are God’s own Jesus tells them, embraced and held close through all they must suffer for the sake of their discipleship.

It is a powerful passage, because it touches us where we live. In the midst of all those things in the landscape of our lives that would threaten and destroy us, Jesus proclaims blessing and hope. Like the first century Christians in the seven churches of Asia, we understand our dual citizenship. Faith in the love and power revealed in the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus has the capacity to lift us up and gather us with others who have struggled and yet are indisputably blessed. Our Sunday worship resembles John’s heavenly vision; when we worship God in the beauty of holiness, we realize that we are among those whom Jesus called “blessed”.

The geography of our lives is defined by gains and losses, times of great joy and happiness, times of great striving and success, as well as times of regret and grief. I admired the honesty and candour of one of our pastors who said to me when he was well into his eighties and had had time to slow down and reflect on all that he had accomplished, “If I had my life to do all over again, I would do it differently.” He was speaking of one particular decision he had made that had resulted in a family leaving his church, but I knew that there were other occasions which he felt deserved a little more grace than he had been prepared to allow. The truth is that he was also able to say that he had been richly blessed in life; that ministry and family had been everything to him, and he was content. I was reminded of Dag Hammarskjöld’s assessment, “For everything that has been: thanks! For all that is to come: Yes!”

The gift in the feasts of All Saints and All Souls is that our home is in God; that God is the constant in the vicissitudes of our earthly existence; that above and beyond us, above and beyond our life together, is One who calls us, loves us, forgives us, remembers us, and calls us again. This accounts for the innumerable multitude of saints for whom we give thanks this day. This is why our dead are the blessed dead. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.”