Reflection for the Solemnity of All Saints

One of the endearing features of today's feast is that it isn't really about the canonised saints but about 'Auntie Margaret' and 'Uncle Jim', about 'Mum' and 'Dad', and about the ordinary people, perhaps never heard of outside of their own community, who have lived lives faithful to God and his commandments. It's about *"the crowds"* of saints gathered around God's throne just as *"the crowds"* gathered around Jesus in today's gospel.

Jesus had a special relationship with *"the crowds"*. He reached out to them, *"had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."*[1] Those crowds gathered on the hillside in today's gospel were a diverse and motley collection *"from Syria…Galilee and the Decapolis, from Jerusalem, Judaea and from beyond the Jordan"* who brought with them *"all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics."* For all their challenges and difficulties, Jesus was not afraid to speak to them about living saintly lives, about how to be *"blessed"*. Moreover, he didn't cast this in terms of attending synagogue more regularly, or saying more prayers, or fasting more frequently but he spoke about inward disposition which leads to outward actions. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit…the meek…those who hunger and thirst for righteousness…the merciful…the pure in heart…the peacemakers."* He then went on to tell them that they must be *"the salt of the earth"* and *"the light of the world."* These remarks were made not to some elitist group but to the diverse and motley crowd with all its ailments and problems whom Jesus invites to rise to the challenge. The saints we celebrate today, the 'Uncle Jims' and 'Auntie Margarets', also heard those words and responded generously. They have been poor in spirit, and pure in heart. They have been meek and they have been merciful. They have hungered and thirsted for righteousness and they have been peacemakers.

But this may not be easy. Jesus also told the motley and diverse crowd gathered on the hillside, *"blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake and blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."* Within a hundred years of Jesus' death and resurrection, St John the Divine records in today's first reading a vision of *"a great multitude that no-one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb"* who had *"come out of the great tribulation."* Many of our 'Uncle Jims' and 'Auntie Margarets' gathered around the throne of God may also have suffered ridicule or hostility because of their fidelity and steadfast following of Christ.

Today we celebrate, not so much the big-name saints, but the ordinary people known only to their families and friends – and, of course, to God – who have heard the message of Jesus and put it into practice. Our feast today reminds us that for sainthood to be attained in heaven it must first be achieved by how we live on earth.

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[1] Matt 9:36