

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2025 i.e. Feast of All Saints.

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18  
Ephesians 1:11-end  
Luke 6:20-31

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't watch much real television these days; most of what I watch is old series on streaming services. But I have acquired a taste for a BBC series which is airing right now – it's called “The Celebrity Traitors”. The final is this coming week. I'm not going to give you any spoilers in case you want to watch it, but I can say that, of the five celebrities who are still left in the game, I knew who three of them were without checking wikipedia. That makes me feel quite good about my popular culture knowledge, which doesn't happen very often.

In case you haven't jumped on this bandwagon yet, let me give you a sense of what it's about. “The Celebrity Traitors” is a sort of reality-TV gameshow. It follows a group of people who are staying in a huge big mansion somewhere in the Scottish Highlands. Most of the group are participating in good faith: they are, in the game's terms, “faithfuls”. But within the bigger group is a small cell of people who are conspiring against the rest, pitting them against each other and covertly eliminating anyone they see as a threat. These are the eponymous “traitors”. As you might expect, the faithful people don't know who the traitors are; the traitors know who is who, as does the viewer. So the show is rich in dramatic irony; it's compulsive viewing, and as our own Peter Vojak guessed in a conversation yesterday, I may be a little bit obsessed with this show. I think his comment was just a wild stab in the dark; which quite appropriate.

I've been intrigued by the way the show divides people into “faithfuls” on the one hand, and “traitors” on the other. Most of the people are genuinely trying to be faithful, but if you do choose to watch it, you'll get to see the contestants enjoying some successes, and some utter failures of faithfulness. As I admitted to Peter yesterday my brain woke me up the morning after watching a particularly exciting episode this week with an idea for a strategy of how to play the game if I was trying to be “faithful”.

It's a fun thought experiment. Of course, there have been times – some of them in very recent history – when this sort of thing hasn't been a thought experiment: it's been the stuff of life and death. That's true under some tyrannical regimes in the world today, and it has also been true in

story of Christianity. Picture a group of at least thirteen people in an upper room; and one of them drops a bombshell: “Very truly, I tell you,” he says, “one of you will betray me.” [John 13:21 etc.] Jesus' prophesy doesn't come out of the blue. Long before the Last Supper he had been openly teaching that his journey to Jerusalem would end in his betrayal and death; he had warned his disciples that they would face persecution in the world, and that the good news he was encouraging them to share would divide people against their normal friendship and family groups, against rulers and councils. So they knew that some measure of betrayal was on the way.

Against that backdrop, our Gospel reading today makes more sense. Through these blessings and woes, and the uncomfortable teaching that follows, Jesus is preparing his disciples to see the community in which they have always been at home, and the world at large, as a newly hostile place. There are basically two ways a community normally goes from that point, both of which are unfaithful to Jesus. One way a community might go is to cut itself off, to become paranoid and obsessed with its own purity. (We call those sorts of groups “cults”.) The other way communities normally go is to try and include more people, but to maintain that bigger group's boundaries by violence: especially by scapegoating minorities and foreigners. (We call that approach “nationalism”.) People calling themselves Christians have dabbled with both of those solutions at different times; but neither of them is faithful to Jesus.

What Jesus actually points us towards is what we call “The Church”. Sometimes Christians have tried it out; when they do it changes the world. The Church is a community defined by radical undefensiveness, by a willingness to suffer, and an unceasing engagement with difference. Love is a word that gets thrown around very easily, and it's easy to think love only means doing and saying nice things which make everybody your friends. I say (and Jesus says) that love – if you're doing it right – makes you lots of enemies. But if you're doing it right, that won't stop you.

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Today is one of the great feast days of our Church's calendar: the Feast of All Saints. We celebrate individual saints throughout the year, so today isn't about listing all the saints we like (although that's never a bad thing to do). The Feast of All Saints is more about remembering that these holy people – still living and dearly departed – make up a single body, a body of which we are also one part. We are, in the words of the Apostles Creed, a Communion: the Communion of Saints.

The Church is Christ's Body. It is also, in the terms of my new favourite TV show, the faithful

community *par excellence*. Because – at some times more effectively than others – it has heard and responded to the underlying wisdom of the blessings and woes Jesus pronounces in our Gospel today. Jesus knew that he personally was going to the Cross, and he teaches us to expect that we will go there too. The message of the Cross is that poverty, hunger, and grief can be consolations and a means of grace. And so can the experience of suffering hatred, exclusion and defamation – they've done those things to faithful people throughout the ages; and grace abounds all the more.

The real bane of the faithful community is not poverty and hunger and grief; it is not hatred and exclusion and defamation. All of these things are tragic on a human level, and we should work to prevent them with as much energy as we can spare. But from God's perspective these sufferings are just so much material out of which to grow endurance and character and hope, as Paul says somewhere [Romans 5:3-4]. No: the real bane of the faithful community is complacency: wealth and satisfaction; comfort and a good reputation. When the Church indulges these things for too long it ceases to be itself; it forgets how it had its beginnings in the sufferings of Jesus Christ: his betrayal and Passion.

So when Jesus pronounces woes on the complacent, it isn't because he doesn't like comfort. The Gospel doesn't arise out of jealousy, or class warfare, or fear, or any of the other common human motives for revolution. Jesus condemns complacency because it eats away at the things that make faithfulness possible. Complacency is basically incompatible with the kind of community he came to create.

Like the celebrities on my new favourite TV show, the Church is always in a place of testing. The test is not so much whether we can avoid suffering, as whether, in the face of that suffering, we can still be faithful. And to see what faithfulness looks like, we need look no further than Jesus Christ; we need look no further than the blessings and woes and the other teachings we have read today.

I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.