

Reflection for Sunday 1st November: Revelation 7:9-12 – ALL SAINTS DAY

I wonder if you've ever been part of a really large crowd? I was thinking this week what the largest crowd I'd ever been in was, and the honest answer is I'm not sure. Initially I would have said it was the Free Nelson Mandela March I went on in London as an enthusiastic 17 year old back in 1989. At the time, the crowd seemed countless, though reading the reports now, it was more likely between 50,000 and 100,000. Which means that probably our family's trips to the Olympic Stadium in 2012, which seated 80,000, with many tens of thousands more at other venues in the Olympic Park, is the biggest crowd I've ever been a part of.

There's something awe-inspiring about a big crowd, isn't there? Certainly the roar of the Olympic Stadium as we cheered on Mo Farah was a volume of sound I've never experienced – and that was just for his heat, not the final itself. There's something profoundly moving about **the sense of a shared experience**, of an occasion which draws together huge numbers of people from all kinds of backgrounds into one committed community.

You see it every Saturday afternoon in the cathedrals of sport all across our country. Men and women – mostly men admittedly, many of whom would never dream of setting foot in a church on Sunday – gather to worship, singing their hearts out with arms outstretched in love and adoration, crying out pleading prayers when their teams are losing, studying the scriptures of the matchday programme to read the word of the boss and memorise the team sheet, and sharing a mediocre-quality drink of fellowship afterwards. Hang on, I'm sure that all reminds me of something.....

And that's the point isn't it? These large gatherings at some level go to the heart of what it means to be human. **We were made to gather in worship**, and if we don't gather to worship God, we'll gather to worship something or someone else. Or both, quite possibly.

Today is All Saints Day, a day when the church celebrates... the Church! We give thanks for the faithful generations who have gone before us, and pray for grace to continue to be faithful in this generation. For many of us now, we're used to practising that in quite small groups and communities. And not just in this season of restrictions, most churches in the UK before lockdown had less than 100 people on a normal Sunday.

We don't usually get that sense of walking into a vast crowd, all here to worship God. Which is one of the reasons why it's quite healthy occasionally to go to one of those big events like Greenbelt or Spring Harvest or New Wine or Prom Praise or the Big Church Day Out. I do remember my first visit to Spring Harvest as an adult in 1999, walking into the big top on the first evening, which seated about 5,000 people, and suddenly experiencing what it was like to worship with thousands of Christians. It took my breath away.

It's no bad thing to remember that while we might feel small, **there's still quite a lot of us**, even in the UK. On any given Sunday before lockdown, there were about 4 million people in church, probably 6 or 7 million who would be at church at least once in the month – and of course there's over 2 billion who profess to be Christians worldwide.

And one day, we will all get to meet God, and each other. That's quite a mind-blowing thought, and possibly quite unsettling for some of us. I think there's plenty of room in heaven, even the introverts will love it! But today's reading gives us a flavour of what our worship will be like. A countless multitude of believers, from all across the world, worshipping God with great joy.

This is our future. And in fact even today when we worship in our homes, or in small face-to-face gatherings, we are joining in with this vast multitude in heaven – millions of hearts all united in one global, universal act of worship.

But as I close, let's remind ourselves of one last thing: the purpose of the church is not the church! **We exist to worship God**, especially God in the person of Jesus. It is to God alone that we give praise and glory, wisdom and thanks, honour and power and strength. Ultimately All Saints Day points us back to God, the one who countless believers in dozens of generations have worshipped. May praise and glory be to our God, for ever and ever, Amen.

A note about our Autumn Appeal

Just before we sing our final hymn, I want to talk briefly about something I rarely mention, in fact I haven't mentioned it during any of our online services over the last 8 months. We're delighted to be able to offer these services to everyone, and will continue to offer them for the foreseeable future – we see this as a permanent and vital part of our church family now, and it's great that people across the country and even the world join us every week. It's a small symbol of today's glorious passage, isn't it? And we give great thanks for that.

But while we will always offer this service completely free, to bless as many as possible, I do want to say that like many organisations we have taken a bit of a hit in our finances. Not as much as many, but we are forecasting a deficit of a few thousand pounds this year, and possibly worse next year.

I have no doubt that our great God will provide, but I'm conscious that it's not as easy for people who want to donate to make that part of their worship – we don't have a virtual offering plate. But today starts our Autumn Appeal. If you feel prompted to make a donation to help us continue to offer this service to everyone, we would be hugely grateful. If you get the email forwarded on to you, you'll find details there. Otherwise, please do contact me direct via the church website and I'll forward you the church's bank details. Thank you.