St Matthew in-the-City

Saints Nobody Would Paint

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All Saints' Day
Matthew 5:1-12
Sunday 1 November 2026

Last night, if your street is anything like most streets in Auckland now, small witches and superheroes were knocking on doors with bags in hand. Halloween arrived in Aotearoa the way most things do from America, by way of the television and the supermarket - and it sits oddly here: an autumn festival of bare trees and long nights, held in spring, with the pōhutukawa about to flower. But its name, at least, belongs to the church. All Hallows' Eve. The night before All Saints.

Long before plastic pumpkins, children in British villages went "souling". On the eve of All Souls they knocked on doors, offered to pray for the household's dead to help free them from Purgatory. In return they were given a small spiced cake for their trouble. Trick-or-treat, it turns out, has a Christian grandmother.

What strikes me about last night, though, is this. It is the one night of the year we open our doors to strangers', albeit children, and give without asking a single question. Nobody checks whether the little vampire on the step deserves a handful of sweets. Hmm. Blessed are the merciful, Jesus says. I wonder what this country would look like if we kept our doors open like that on the other 364 nights.

And this morning, the day after, the church celebrates All Saints' - with a gospel we all think we know.

Somewhere in the many church halls around the Motu, especialy in the church of my youth, there is a framed copy of today's gospel. You know the one, sitting beside a picture of a blond 6ft2 blueyed figure. A border of lilies or doves, curly script a little faded where the afternoon sun gets at it. Somebody's great-aunt embroidered it, or it came free with a calendar. It is a lovely thing. And it's a problem.

When words end up on calendars, bookmarks and tea towels, we stop hearing them. They turn into furniture - pleasant, familiar, and entirely harmless. And the Beatitudes are many things, but harmless is not one of them.

This All Saints' Sunday, let's try to hear them again. Start with who was listening. Just before today's reading, Matthew tells us the crowds had come from everywhere — Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, beyond the Jordan — bringing their sick with them. The ones in pain. The ones possessed. The ones who fitted and fell. The ones who could not walk. This was not a congregation in its Sunday best. This was the queue outside the night shelter.

And Jesus goes up the mountain and sits down — which is what a rabbi did when he was about to teach something that mattered - and he looks out at these people, and the first word out of his mouth is: Blessed.

Now let's go a little deeper, because that word carries more than we think. The Greek is makarios. It doesn't mean "you'll be rewarded later if you behave yourself." It is closer to a declaration - God's favour rests on you, right here, right now. Scholars argue (as scholars do) about whether the Beatitudes are instructions - be meek, be merciful - or announcements - God is on the side of the meek and the merciful. I think they are both, but the announcement comes first. Jesus is not handing the crowd a to-do list. He is telling people who have been told all their lives that they are cursed — by illness, by poverty, by grief - that the world has it exactly backwards.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Hmm. Not one of those is a quality anybody puts on their CV. Nobody ever got a promotion for mourning well.

And here is where All Saints' Day comes in. When we hear the word "saint", most of us picture stained glass. Halos. Calm faces, tidy robes, one hand raised in blessing. Saints are the people who got it right. And then Jesus reads out his list of the blessed - and it is a list of people nobody would ever think to put in a stained glass window.

For a good few years, working with people who slept rough in Auckland, I went to more funerals than I care to count. Often there were four or five of us in a church built for a hundred. A support worker. Someone from the night shelter. One or two mates from the street sitting at the back. And often, someone would read today's gospel. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

I remember sitting in one of those spaces - for a man most of this city had walked past for many years - and thinking: if you went looking for the people Jesus was describing on that hillside, you would not start at the cathedral. You would start right here. Poor in spirit: he had nothing left to pretend with. Mourning: he had lost nearly everyone. Meek: he had long ago learned not to take up room. Hungry for justice: he never got much of it. If that man was not one of the blessed, the word means nothing at all.

So who are the saints? The church has always said - it's there in the Creed, the communion of saints - that the saints are not only the famous ones. They are the whole company of the faithful, the living and the departed together. And here Māori understanding has a strength that Pākehā church culture has sometimes lost. At a tangi the dead are named, spoken to, wept over. Whakapapa holds the living and the dead in one continuos line. All Saints' is the day the church tries to do something like that: we name our dead, and we say they are still part of us.

Tomorrow is All Souls' Day. If All Saints' remembers the holy, All Souls' remembers everyone else. The grandmother. The friend who went too young. The baby who never came home from the hospital. The man in the half-empty chapel.

A French abbot, Odilo of Cluny, began it a thousand years ago: one day a year to pray for all the dead, not just the famous ones. At the Reformation the Church of England threw it out, nervous of purgatory and the selling of prayers. Then came the First World War, and a generation of parents with no grave to visit, and the church quietly brought it back. Grief has a way of correcting our theology.

We have our own version of this now. At Matariki, one of the stars, Pōhutukawa, carries those who have died in the past year, and families stand in the cold before dawn and say their names. A whole country learning, slowly, to refuse to let its dead become nameless.

So perhaps that is the way to hear, Blessed are those who mourn. Not as a prize for grieving well, but as Jesus standing beside everyone who carries a name they can hardly bear to say - and promising that the name is held.

To work then. Three of these Beatitudes, held up to the light of this land.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The word translated “righteousness” - dikaiosynē (dekaios-ciñay)- is the same word for justice. It’s not private piety. It’s things being put right. And in Aotearoa, by the latest figures, one child in seven is living in material hardship - going without the basics: a warm bed, decent shoes, enough to eat. One in seven. That number has been getting worse, not better, after both major parties promised to halve it. To hunger and thirst for righteousness here is not to feel a little sad about that. It is to be unable to settle until it changes.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Jesus is quoting Psalm 37: the meek shall inherit the land. And “meek” in the Bible does not mean a doormat. It means strength under control - the way a horse is meek when it could throw you, but doesn’t. In this land, where the question of, who holds the whenua and how it came to be held, is still raw, we should hear that Beatitude with some honesty. In God’s economy the earth does not go to those who grab it. It goes to those who refused to grab.

Which brings me to Thursday. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. This Thursday is the fifth of November. Most of the country will be letting off fireworks for Guy Fawkes - an English plot more than four hundred years old that has nothing whatever to do with us.

But the fifth of November is a day that does belong to us. On 5 November 1881, some 1,600 armed constabulary and volunteers, led by the Native Minister John Bryce, marched on the village of Parihaka in Taranaki.

Parihaka was a community built on peace. Its leaders, Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi, had taught their people to resist the confiscation of their land without violence — ploughing land that had been taken, rebuilding fences that had been torn down, and never striking back. When the troops arrived that morning they were met by children, singing. More than two thousand people sat quietly together, many with white feathers - the raukura, their sign of peace - in their hair. Te Whiti’s word to his people, as an eyewitness recorded

it, was: “Be steadfast in all that is peaceful.” Then he and Tohu were arrested and held without trial for sixteen months. The village was pulled apart, a devastation known to this day as Te Rā o te Pāhua – The Day of Plunder.

I want you to hold that scene in mind. Two thousand people sitting on the ground, feathers in their hair, while the Crown’s soldiers walked in. If you wanted a picture of the Beatitudes - the meek, the persecuted for righteousness’ sake, the peacemakers - you would be hard pressed to find a truer one in our history. Te Whiti and Tohu drew deeply on the scriptures the missionaries brought - and then lived those scriptures more faithfully than the Christian government that marched against them.

That is uncomfortable, and it should be. But I want to leave you with hope, because the Beatitudes end in hope. Rejoice and be glad, Jesus says, for your reward is great in heaven. Not because suffering is good. Because God has the last word on it. The half-empty chapel is not the end of the story. The dismantled village is not the end of the story - the people of Parihaka still gather there, and the white feather is still worn. Those who mourn will be comforted. That is a promise, not a greeting-card wish.

So here is what I’d ask of you this week.

First: from a quiet space, bring to mind one saint who will never be in a stained-glass window. Someone you have known - living or dead - who was poor in spirit, or meek, or merciful, or who made peace at their own cost. Say their name out loud. Just say it. The communion of saints is made of names.

And secondly: on Thursday night, when the fireworks go up over your backyard or public space, remember Parihaka – and tell someone. Then remember two thousand people sitting on the ground with white feathers in their hair. And having remembered ask yourself: what would it take for me to be steadfast in all that is peaceful?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Amen.