Why are we looking at the Beatitudes on All Saints Sunday? It’s because the Beatitudes are promises given to all the saints! Who are the saints? St Peter? St Matthew? Yes, but also all of us who have committed ourselves to following the way of Christ. Whatever our life story, however it came about – if we identify ourselves as followers of Christ we are saints!

The feast day of All Saints is an opportunity for believers to remember all saints and martyrs, known and unknown, throughout Christian history. Of course, the Church – the Christian community – has always looked up to some of its members because their lives were especially holy; the witness of their lives was and is a great encouragement to us. They were notable exemplars of the Christian faith, in one way or another. Earlier this year, my wife Margaret and I visited Assisi and other places associated with St Francis, and it’s remarkable how much the memory of his life is still revered, 800 years later.

So the word saint has this connotation of someone who is admired for the quality of their life – even in secular contexts you will hear someone say, for example, ‘Oh, she’s a real saint!’ But, whilst we give thanks to God for those whose lives in the past are a great encouragement and example to us, the whole All Saints liturgy, hymns, Scriptures and prayers concern all of us who call ourselves Christian now. Time and again, you will come across the word saints used in St Paul’s letters to denote the members of Church communities throughout the world. So, for example, here he is addressing the believers in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1:2 (NRSV) \[ To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. \]

Sanctified, called to be saints: they give us the clue as to what it’s all about. If we describe ourselves as Christians, as followers of Christ, it’s because in some way we feel called, drawn, attracted to Christ – to use the affirmation attributed to Martin Luther: Here I stand; I can do no other.

Whatever words we use, however we express it, we sense ourselves to be set apart, which is one of the root meanings of the word saint. To use the familiar expression: we are in the world, but not of it. That doesn’t mean that we are to be strange or peculiar, and it certainly doesn’t mean that we are better than anyone else! We are part of the human family, but we are also part of God’s family, as John describes us in his letter: 1 John 3:1 (NRSV) \[ See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. \] Out of sheer love, God has called us, drawn us into his family through the achievement of Jesus, his Son – which we commemorate at every Eucharist.

To be a saint, to be a member of the Church – God’s family – implies that our lives are to be images of God’s life, as manifested in Jesus. We are to be ‘little Christs’ in this world – and look what they did to him! It’s not easy to stand apart from the society around us and say, That is not our way of going about things, because we want to be Christ like. We want to express a better, more fulfilled life-style.
This is where the Beatitudes come in: they are for us! The Beatitudes are not cast in the form of imperatives, like the Ten Commandments, though obviously there are implications, as we’ve just been saying.

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes instances of how our life, our behaviour, is to be distinct from, to surpass even, the usual understanding of what is the moral life. In contrast, the Beatitudes can be seen as both promise and consolation. The first half of each Beatitude reflects what is, or should be, the quality of life in the Church community: poor in spirit, meek, merciful, and so on. These descriptions echo the prophecy of Isaiah 61, which Jesus applied to himself in his synagogue address at Nazareth, quoted in Luke 4: Isaiah 61:1 (NRSV) ^1^ The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners etc. The qualities of the Anointed One of Isaiah 61 – Christ himself – are to be the hallmarks of the life of his people, his saints.

The second half of each Beatitude foretells the community’s future. They offer hope of what is to come. In other words, Jesus is saying, You may suffer for living and behaving in this kind of way – but it is worth it! You will be vindicated in the end. If you persevere in this life to which you have been called, I will draw you into my fullness of life in eternity. Jesus is inviting us to view our present life and circumstances from the prospect of the world to come. Then, for example, it is the meek who inherit the earth – not those with military or economic muscle. We see a similar proclamation in the Magnificat: He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.

The Beatitudes give us a vision of life in Christ rather than a set of instructions on which we will be examined (so it’s not a case of ‘Attempt any three!’) They imply that the Christian community, and the Kingdom of God, is a work in progress. ‘Those who mourn’ are not so much those who are sorry for their sins as those who bewail the fact that God has not yet put right the injustices of this world.

I don’t know what your view is about what’s been going on outside St Paul’s, but if you are one who is involved with justice issues and campaigns, you count as one of those who mourn. Those who ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’ are longing to see right conduct being put into action in both Church and society. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers.’ That one is especially meaningful for us in the Coventry Cathedral community: we know the truth of that statement. As with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, we’re not talking here of things in the spiritual ether, as it were, but with practical issues of the here-and-now. This is God’s earth and we want his kingdom to come – the sooner the better!

Blessed are the pure in heart: that is, those in whom thought and action match up. It involves singleness of intention, that intention being to do God’s will. For they shall see God. What does that mean? See visions? Come to perceive God at work? Recognise the presence of God in the life of his saints? Any of those things, and possibly more.

The last two Beatitudes reflect the realities of living the Christian life. As we touched on earlier, following Christ can have serious implications. Some have paid the ultimate price for their allegiance to Christ. Notice how Jesus encourages those who suffer for their faith: you’re not alone, he says – it’s always been like that. You’re part of that great community of all the ages who come through tribulation and suffering, just like me. The other reading we could have used this morning was from Revelation: the theme of the whole book of Revelation, as the name suggests, is to give an overview of ultimate realities, the prospect of wrongs righted and the saints vindicated. That is the vision set before us: by the commemoration of All Saints, and by the affirmations of the Beatitudes. Let both
be an encouragement to us saints of today to faithfully make our contribution to the great stream of witness to the life and love of God in our world.