I wonder – what would a perfect life look like for you? What would be the essential ingredients? What would be at its heart, its core – what would really characterize it? What do you really want your life to be like?

There was a deal of controversy a few years ago when Liverpool Cathedral rang out this well known song on its bells:

*Imagine there’s no heaven*
*It’s easy if you try*
*No hell below us*
*Above us, only sky*
*Imagine all the people living for today*
*Imagine there’s no countries*
*It isn’t hard to do*
*Nothing to kill or die for*
*And no religion, too*
*Imagine all the people living life in peace*

_You may say I’m a dreamer_
_But I’m not the only one_
_I hope some day you’ll join us_
_And the world will be as one_

*Imagine no possessions*
*I wonder if you can*
*No need for greed or hunger*
*A brotherhood of man*
*Imagine all the people sharing all the world*

_You may say I’m a dreamer_
_But I’m not the only one_
_I hope some day you’ll join us_
_And the world will live as one_

The poet Malcolm Guite has pointed out that Lennon’s vision is in fact clearly inspired by a Christian view of heaven – the reference to no religion, and no heaven, may obscure that, but nonetheless that is what we are being presented with in the lyrics. It’s a hope for humanity … which of course is exactly what heaven is. Heaven is a place where there is a complete unity of humanity with creation – a new creation – and creator. There is no need for anxious hoarding of possessions or relationships, for all have sufficient, and all are cared for. **Above all, there is no fear.** Our lives are beset by fear – the terrible ‘what if’ that circles us, lurking behind every corner, and so too much of our way of living is set against a gigantic process of risk assessment and protecting ourselves from … well, from what? Poverty? Ill health? Conflict? Loneliness? Insignificance? Each of us has fears, and much of our lives are spent avoiding what might happen. Seeking to shore ourselves up against the freak tides of fate, if you like.

It’s this lurking fear that Jesus confronts in the Beatitudes – the list of blessings are a way of allowing ourselves to be set free from fear, paradoxically by welcoming the reality of our vulnerability. The Gospel reading today, in which Jesus addresses his select few, the disciples – apart from the crowds, left at the foot of the mountain, is a litany of blessings for those who know their vulnerability and embrace it, choosing to turn and depend on God instead of seeking self-protection. It is, straightforwardly, a description of what it means to live as Saints – to live in
dependence on God and in community with God’s family. It means to live without fear: fearing only God, serving only God, no other earthly fears are relevant.

And so our hearts, minds and spirits are drawn up into the vision of heaven, where our hopes are fixed. The destination of our wanderings, it is the goal of our aspirations. I was taking some visitors around the Cathedral on Wednesday this week, and always, they helped me to see things which I had not noticed for myself. Firstly, they pointed out that this Cathedral has more about Revelation in it than any other they knew – it was actually the Dean and Provost of the National Cathedral in Washington DC. I sat with them at the front of the Nave as Dan, our head verger led us in the Litany – we don’t so often sit there as clergy, and it’s a treat. Randy, the Dean, was looking at the face of Christ as we all do by day or week by week, and noticed that in the two sides of Jesus’ face there is a contrast. It reflects one classic image of Orthodox icons of Jesus, the Pantocrator image – of Christ ruling in glory – which of course is what our tapestry depicts. (By the way, I have sometimes said that it’s a shame we don’t have an icon for devotion in the Cathedral ... !) In a few Pantocrator images, the two sides of the face are drawn to indicate the humanity, or crucifixion of Christ on one side – a more pallid or darker complexion, ad drooping eye – whilst on the other, the eye is brighter, the complexion more fair. I confess that I had never quite seen that before, and can find no reference to it in the literature – but it is plain to see, once pointed out.

And so the journey from crucifixion to glory embodied in the our buildings from the Ruins to the tapestry is presented not just in the marks of Passion in Christ’s hands and feet, but in his very face. It is an encouragement that we, broken and flawed human beings as we are, belong in heaven with him, our Saviour. We are drawn into the picture painted in the book of Revelation, and presented to us in our very own tapestry – and in today’s first reading.

The tapestry, with its classic Orthodox mandorla, the almond shaped framing of Jesus, the four living creatures and emerald sea of Revelation chapter four, and rays of God’s presence and the dove of the Spirit above Christ’s head and the human figure sheltered between his enormous toes, is an icon of grace, drawing us into the heavenly vision whenever we come before it. On Friday night we had a rock concert here in the Cathedral. With a little extra lighting, the building looked stunning – key features had been picked out and I watched people gazing at the lit tablets of the word, especially these two, ‘A New Commandment’, and ‘Come unto me’. The thorns above the choir stalls and the high altar cross looked incredible, as did the roof. But above all there was the tapestry. Beth Hart, the performer who had drawn over 1300 die hard fans – the concert was sold out – came on stage with the words, ‘Can you see what a beautiful place we are in? That killer painting at the back, all the green, don’t know if you can see it? Awesome!’ The changing colours on the tapestry throughout the night and the regular references to Jesus and prayer in the set kept drawing us back to that extraordinary gaze.

On this All Saints day the tapestry reminds us of all that we live our lives towards, a vision that commends itself in earthly terms to those who struggle with the idea of heaven – even including those who have experienced heaven as a concept that has been used to alienate and divide. One of the challenge with any talk of the ‘Saints’ is the way that it can exclude – either we feel excluded, because we don’t belong ... or, perhaps worse, we know that ‘we’ belong, but we are confident that ‘they’ don’t – and we may even be pleased by that! Saints are understood as being different – but in truth, saints are just the same. Weak, struggling, beset by fears and anxieties, but the key difference is that they face those fears, embrace those weaknesses – much as we embrace and live through our brokenness in this Cathedral – and come to God with them. Just as Christ’s face holds death and life, human and divine – our faces hold life and death – and like his face, ours belong also in heaven.

We hold at our heart here in Coventry the call to Reconciliation. The idea that anyone might celebrate the notion that some – presumably us - might be in heaven, seeing this vision for ourselves – whilst others were excluded is anathema. Our prayer is that all would be in the heavenly host – perhaps, surprised like John Lennon to find themselves there – in a place where we have at last experienced in fullness the Healing of the Wounds of History, a place where we have finally Learned to Live with Difference and Celebrate Diversity, and where we have realize what it means to Build a Culture of Peace. Jesus is God’s Gift to Creation, to reconcile all things to himself – and on this All Saints Day our prayer is that we might be set free from all fear to inhabit and embrace that promise, and commit ourselves to share it with all those who have ever lived. To live as Saints, inviting all to share that life – and to join with all in a hope for humanity, the hope of heaven.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*