

Matthew 5: 1-12

GOD OF ALL THE AGES, YOUR SAINTS WHO LIVED IN FAITHFUL SERVICE SURROUND YOUR THRONE AND OFFER YOU PRAISE AND WORSHIP BOTH NIGHT AND DAY. MAY WE, YOUR SAINTS ON EARTH, JOIN OUR VOICES WITH THEIRS TO PROCLAIM YOUR RULE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PEACE, WHICH COMES TO US THROUGH JESUS CHRIST NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

ON THE COASTS OF SCOTLAND AND IRELAND THERE ARE CERTAIN SITES THE LOCALS CALL "THIN PLACES." THIN PLACES ARE NOT SO NAMED BECAUSE THE ALTITUDE IS ANY HIGHER OR THE AIR ANY THINNER THERE. RATHER, THEY ARE CALLED "THIN" BECAUSE IT IS BELIEVED THAT IN THESE PLACES THE DISTANCE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH SHRINKS, AND THE VEIL BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS IS TO "THIN" YOU CAN ACTUALLY PERCEIVE SOMETHING OF HEAVEN ITSELF.

THE ANCIENT CELTS—SENSING THE DEEP SPIRITUALITY OF THESE SITES—BUILT MANY OF THEIR WORSHIP PLACES ON THEM, SOME STILL MARKED TODAY BY CIRCLES OF STONE. LATER CHRISTIANS ALSO BUILT CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES AND CEMETERIES THERE. AND PEOPLE WHO VISIT THESE SITES TODAY SOMETIMES SAY THEY LOSE TRACK OF TIME AND SPACE WHILE THERE, AND THEY KNOW—DEEP DOWN INSIDE—THEY ARE ON HOLY GROUND. FOR IN THIN PLACES, BOUNDARIES OF TIME AND SPACE FADE AWAY. THERE IS NO YESTERDAY, TODAY OR TOMORROW—ONLY ETERNITY STRETCHING FORTH IN A TIMELESS CONTINUUM.

TODAY WITH MANY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AROUND THE WORLD WE CELEBRATE ALL SAINTS SUNDAY; A TIME TO VISIT THE THIN PLACES, AS WE THINK ABOUT OUR LOVED ONES WHO NOW DWELL IN THE WORLD BEYOND THIS ONE. AND WHAT BETTER GUIDE TO TAKE US THERE THAN THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION?

TRADITION ATTRIBUTES THE WRITING OF REVELATION TO THE APOSTLE JOHN WHO, LATER IN LIFE DREAMED DREAMS AND SAW VISIONS ON THE ISLE OF PATMOS AND RECORDED THEM FOR A CHURCH SUFFERING PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM. JOHN MUST HAVE BEEN

SOMEONE WHO FREQUENTED THE THIN PLACES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD. FOR HIS WRITINGS ARE FULL OF MYSTERY AND WONDER THAT COME FROM GLIMPING THINGS TOO HOLY TO BE CONTAINED BY WORDS.

SUCH IS CERTAINLY THE CASE IN OUR SCRIPTURE READING TODAY FROM REVELATION 7, WHERE THE AUTHOR INVITES US TO JOIN IN PEEKING THROUGH THE THIN VEIL AND GLIMPING SOMETHING OF HEAVEN ITSELF! THE VIEW HERE IS DIFFERENT THAN IN LATER CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK WHERE WE BEHOLD A CITY WHOSE STREETS ARE PAVED WITH GOLD AND WHERE A RIVER, BRIGHT AS CRYSTAL, FLOWS FROM THE THRONE OF GOD IN ITS MIDST. HERE WE GLIMPSE NOT SO MUCH THE PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE CITY, BUT ITS TENOR, ITS VIBRANCY, ITS INNER LIFE.

THIS STORY THE BOOK OF REVELATION TELLS ON ALL SAINTS SUNDAY HAS AN ENORMOUS CROWD OF CHRISTIANS..PALM BRANCHES IN THEIR HANDS, THEIR ROBES WASHED WHITE IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB...STAND BEFORE THE THRONE. THERE ARE SO MANY NO ONE CAN COUNT THEM ALL. THEY HAVE COME FROM EVERY WHERE, FROM EVERY RACE AND TRIBE, FROM EVERY NATION AND LANGUAGE. THEY ARE EVERYBODY; AND WHAT DO THEY DO? THEY SING! IT IS WHAT SAINTS DO! THEY SING.

THINK ABOUT IT...IN THE MIDST OF WHATEVER IS GOING ON AROUND THEM, SAINTS AND BELIEVERS ALWAYS SING. DAY OR NIGHT, IN DESERT OR OASIS, WHETHER IN PRISON OR FREE, DURING CALM OR STORM, THEY SING. "SALVATION BELONGS TO OUR GOD AND TO THE LAMB." THEY LISTEN TO THE ANGELS AND THE ELDERS SINGING: "AMEN! BLESSING AND GLORY AND WISDOM AND THANKSGIVING AND HONOR AND POWER AND MIGHT BE TO OUR GOD FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN." IT IS NOT SIMPLY WHAT THE SAINTS *KNOW* THAT MATTERS; IT IS ALSO WHAT THEY *HEAR*.

SAINTS SING! BELIEVERS SING! YET SOMETIMES THE WORLD TRICKS BELIEVERS INTO REFUSING TO SING. "MY ELEMENTARY MUSIC TEACHER TOLD ME I COULDN'T SING." "I WAS KICKED OUT OF THE CHURCH CHOIR." "I DON'T KNOW THE WORDS AND TUNES TO THESE NEW HYMNS. HOW CAN I SING THEM?" "MY VOICE LEFT ME YEARS AGO; I CAN'T SING ANYMORE." REVELATION OVERCOMES SUCH TRICKERY WITH THE MUSIC OF THE HEAVENLY

CHOIR REMINDING THE SAINTS AND BELIEVERS---LIVING AND DEAD—THAT THE GOOD NEWS IS HEARD, EVEN OVERHEARD. THE SAINTS' CRY MAY NOT ALWAYS COME IN FOUR-PART-HARMONY, BUT IT IS ALWAYS A JOYFUL NOISE. SO THE SAINTS LISTEN WHILE THEY JOIN IN SONG. EVEN IN THE MIDST OF EVIL, WAR, SOCIAL UPHEAVAL, FAMINE, AND GREED, SAINTS CANNOT KEEP FROM SINGING! THROUGH SICKNESS UNTO DEATH, PERSECUTION, NATURAL DISASTER, ANY INJUSTICE THAT CONFRONTS THEM, SAINTS CANNOT KEEP FROM SINGING!

WHY? BECAUSE BY LISTENING THEY HEAR THE GOOD NEWS. LIVING BETWEEN THE ALPHA AND OMEGA, THE FIRST AND THE LAST, SAINTS AT THE THRONE HEAR THE BEAUTIFUL GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S FINAL WORD REACHING BACK INTO HISTORY. BY SINGING, THEY PAY IT FORWARD AND PROCLAIM IT LOUDLY. THEY SING FOR COURAGE TO LIVE IN THE PRESENT WHILE ALWAYS FACTING THE FUTURE. THERE IS NO SILENCE IN THIS VISION OF JOHN'S, FOR NO ONE CAN KEEP FROM SINGING OR LISTENING BEFORE THE THRONE. SAINTS FROM EVERY NATION LISTEN AND SING, AND GOD KEEPS HOPE ALIVE IN OUR WORLD.

WORSHIP ON THIS FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK..SUNDAY... IS THE RESURRECTION SIGN OF VICTORY OVER DEATH. PERHAPS WE ARRIVE AT WORSHIP WEARY AND WORRIED, CAUGHT UP IN ALL WE'VE BEEN THROUGH, FEELING BEATEN DOWN, TIRED, EMPTY. BUT WHEN WE HEAR THE MUSIC, WHEN WE SING OUR FIRST HYMN, WE BECOME AGAIN THE NEW CREATION WE ARE IN JESUS CHRIST. AND WHEN THE FINAL BLESSING HAS BEEN PRONOUNCED, WE LEAVE WITH A SONG IN OUR HEARTS AND A TUNE ON OUR TONGUES. WE ARE NOT AFRAID TO ENGAGE THE WORLD...OUR NEW WEEK, BECAUSE SHELTER IS OURS ALREADY. THE LAMB AT THE CENTER OF THE THRONE IS ALREADY OUR SHEPHERD. THE WATERS OF LIFE ARE FLOWING. TROUBLE MAY NOT HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY ERASED FROM OUR LIVES, BUT TEARS NO LONGER OVERWHELM US, FOR GOD IS PRESENT TO WIPE THEM AWAY.

MANY TIMES IN WORSHIP I FEEL LIKE I AM STANDING ON HOLY GROUND, AND THE VEIL BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH GROWS STRANGELY THIN. PERHAPS YOU HAVE ALSO EXPERIENCED THIS....WHEN A PARTICULAR HYMN REMINDS YOU OF A LOVED ONE, OR A PRAYER SPEAKS TO YOUR HEART. TODAY IS A DAY FOR THIN PLACES. WE ARE STANDING ON

HOLY GROUND RIGHT HERE IN GOD'S HOUSE AS WE WORSHIP THE LAMB. AND IF YOU OPEN YOURSELF TO THE SPIRIT...THE SAME SPIRIT WHO ALLOWED JOHN A GLIMPSE OF HEAVEN ITSELF..YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF TRANSPORTED TO A PLACE WHERE THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THE WORLD TO COME FADE AWAY, AND WHERE YOU SENSE YOUR UNITY NOT ONLY WITH GOD, BUT WITH ALL THE SAINTS YOU LOVED AND WHO NOW DWELL IN GOD'S GLORY.

OPENING OURSELVES TO THE SPIRIT..TO THE MYSTERY THAT SURROUNDS US. DR. RACHEL REMEN WRITES: I WAS LATE FOR WHAT WAS TO BE MY LAST VISIT WITH MY MOTHER. PUSHING THROUGH RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC, TIRED FROM A LONG DAY AT THE OFFICE, I STOPPED TO BUY HER SOME FLOWERS. IT WAS SEVEN IN THE EVENING AND THE FLORIST HAD NO PURPLE IRISES, MY MOTHER'S FAVORITIES, AND LITTLE OF ANYTHING ELSE. SYMPATHIZING WITH MY DISTRESS, HE OFFERED ME A BOUQUET OF HALF-CLOSED IRIS BUDS FROM HIS ICEBOX, ASSURING ME THEY WOULD OPEN IN A FEW HOURS. I TOOK THEM AND WAITED, IRRITATED AND IMPATIENT, AS HE WRAPPED THEM IN GREEN TISSUE. A STRANGE-LOOKING BOUQUET. THEN I HURRIED ON.

CARRYING THE FLOWERS, I PUSHED THROUGH THE HEAVY DOORS OF THE WARD. A NURSE WAS WAITING THERE FOR ME. "I'M SO SORRY," SHE SAID. MY MOTHER HAD DIED A SHORT TIME BEFORE. STUNNED, I ALLOWED MYSELF TO BE LED TO HER ROOM. SHE LAY IN HER BED, SEEMINGLY ASLEEP. HER HANDS STILL WARM. THE NURSE ASKED IF THERE WAS ANYONE I WANTED HER TO CALL. NUMBLY I GAVE HER THE NUMBERS OF FAMILY AND SAT DOWN TO WAIT. IT WAS PEACEFUL AND VERY STILL IN THE ROOM.

FOUR DAYS LATER I WAS THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY ARRANGING FOR MY FOR MY MOTHER'S FUNERAL AND BURIAL. IT WAS AN UNSEASONABLY HOT SPRING AND NEW YORK CITY WAS AT ITS WORST, MUGGY AND UNCOMFORTABLE. THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR WAS A PERSON OF SENSITIVITY AND KINDNESS. GENTLY HE WENT OVER THE ARRANGEMENTS, ASSURING HIMSELF AND ME AGAIN OF THE DETAILS OF MY MOTHER'S WISHES WHICH WE HAD DISCUSSED ON THE PHONE. THEN HE PAUSED, "THERE WAS SOMETHING THAT CAME FROM CALIFORNIA WITH YOUR MOTHER. MAY I SHOW YOU?" HE ASKED. TOGETHER WE

WALKED DOWN THE CORRIDOR TO WHERE MY MOTHER LAY IN HER CLOSED PINE COFFIN. LYING ON THE COFFIN LID, STILL IN THE TWIST OF GREEN TISSUE PAPER WAS THE BOUQUET I HAD LEFT IN MY MOTHER'S HOSPITAL ROOM ON HER BED. BUT NOW THE IRISES WERE IN FULL BLOOM. I REMEMBER THEM STILL WITH GREAT CLARITY, EACH ONE HUGE AND VIBRANT, SEEMINGLY FILLED WITH A PURPLE SORT OF LIGHT. THEY HAD BEEN OUT OF WATER FOR FOUR DAYS.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASY INDEED TO DISMISS THIS SORT OF EXPERIENCE. THE WILLINGNESS TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF A THIN PLACE REQUIRES A TOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY. I WILL NEVER KNOW WHETHER OR NOT I WAS FOR A MOMENT IN THE PRESENCE OF MY MOTHER WHO USED MY FINAL GIFT OF FLOWERS TO MAKE ME A GIFT OF HER OWN, LETTING ME KNOW THAT THERE MAY BE MORE TO LIFE AND THE LIFE BEYOND THAN THE MIND CAN UNDERSTAND. BUT MY FAITH ASSURES ME IT WAS HER AND MY HEART SANG.

THE SAINTS ARE LISTENING AND SINGING: "SALVATION BELONGS TO OUR GOD AND TO THE LAMB!" LET US JOIN THEM AS TOGETHER WE LIFT OUR VOICES IN SONG.

HYMN # 690 WOV

WE GIVE YOU GRATEFUL THANKS, O GOD, FOR ALL THE SAINTS WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US AND WHO NOW DWELL ETERNALLY WITH YOU. WE THANK YOU FOR THEIR WITNESS IN OUR MIDST, THEIR FAITHFULNESS TO YOU, AND THEIR COURAGE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY. AND WE THANK YOU THAT FOR THEM, THERE IS NOW NO MORE CRYING OR PAIN, NO MORE HEARTBREAK, BUT ONLY THE GREAT JOY OF WORSHIPING YOU AND SERVING YOU WITH ALL THE HOSTS OF HEAVEN. LORD IN YOUR MERCY,

LEAD US, HOLY FATHER, TO THOSE THIN PLACES WHERE WE MAY SENSE THEIR PRESENCE ANEW HERE ON EARTH, AND PREPARE US FOR THAT GREAT DAY WHEN WE WILL BE REUNITED WITH ALL THE SAINTS OF HEAVEN, GIVING BLESSING AND HONOR AND GLORY TO YOU. LORD IN YOUR MERCY

HOLY GOD WHO WIPES AWAY ALL TEARS, YOU SENT YOUR SON JESUS TO BLESS THE POOR IN SPIRIT AND TO COMFORT ALL WHO WEEP. THIS MORNING WE PRAY FOR THOSE WHO WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, FOR THOSE WHO ARE ILL, FOR THOSE RECOVERING. WE PRAY FOR.....LORD IN YOUR MERCY,

MERCIFUL FATHER, WE DO NOT PRETEND TO UNDERSTAND THE MYSTERY OF THE FAITH TO WHICH YOU HAVE CALLED US. LEAD US INTO THIS NEW WEEK WITH OPEN HEARTS THAT WE MAY BE PREPARED TO EXPERIENCE AND WITNESS YOUR POWER AND GLORY AS WE RECEIVE WITH JOY WHAT YOU HAVE PLANNED FOR US. AMEN.