

Lord, direct our thoughts and teach us to pray.
Lift up our hearts to worship you in spirit and in truth.
As God's people we have gathered.

Let us worship him together.

What God has prepared for those who love him,
he has revealed to us through the Spirit;
for the Spirit searches everything.
Therefore let us in penitence open our hearts to the Lord,
who has prepared good things for those who love him.

Penitence: God of mercy,
we acknowledge that we are all sinners.
We turn from the wrong that we have thought and said and done,
and are mindful of all that we have failed to do.
For the sake of Jesus who died for us,
forgive us for all that is past,
and help us to live each day
in the light of Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Absolution May God our Father forgive us our sins,
and bring us to the fellowship of his table with his saints for ever. **Amen.**

The Revelation to John 7:9-17 [The Multitude from Every Nation]

I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation,
from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,
robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures,
and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, 'Amen!

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white,
and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.'

Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;
they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

For this reason they are before the throne of God,

and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Matthew 5:1-12 [The Beatitudes]

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

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

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ

Sermon

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I once heard a talk about Celtic mythology, focusing on the appeal of ancient Celtic sites in Ireland and Scotland. The speaker called them "thin places". Much of the talk was a bit airy-fairy, but that phrase stayed with me. Thin places aren't called that 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 so "thin" you can actually perceive something of heaven itself. 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. On a weekend like this one--a weekend when many Christian churches around the world are celebrating All Saints Day and All Souls Day--it is good 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 the Revelation to John? He must have been someone who frequented the thin places of the ancient world, for his writings are full of the mystery and wonder that come from glimpsing things too holy to be contained by words. Such is certainly the case here. The author invites us to join in peeking through the gossamer veil and glimpsing something of heaven itself! I have often heard people say that we are going to be surprised by the people we meet in heaven, and if John's vision is an accurate one, it will definitely be so. John begins this chapter (the portion that was not a part of our reading today) by talking about all the people from the twelve tribes of Israel who will be there--some 144,000 of them--a perfect number symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel times 12 times 1,000. That's a whole lot of Jews--and it reminds us Christians that, as Paul puts it in Romans, we are the branches who have been grafted onto this tree of faith that extends back far further than we do!

And then John broadens the vision even further, saying that in heaven there will be people gathered from every single nation and tribe and language on earth, all giving praise to the Lamb who sits on the throne. And I'm guessing that included in that crowd, too, are going to be a lot of people who surprise us by their presence there. If truth be told, we all have our blind spots, our prejudices, so I think we're all going to be surprised by who is sitting at the Lamb's eternal banquet table with us in heaven. Surely we will see people there we considered unforgivable, unredeemable. People against whom we have long held grudges or prejudices. People from nations we branded with the label "enemy" or people we failed to even see in this life because of their poverty, disease or disability, or station in life.

They will all be there. For no matter how inclusive we think we are in our embrace of others, heaven--according to John's vision--will be far more so. When we peer through John's veil, what we see is that heaven is actually a very active place. And what is it that people are busy doing? They are worshipping and serving God and others--doing those very same things that gave them the greatest joy, the greatest meaning, in their life here on earth. When John looks through the veil what he sees are people of every tongue and tribe and nation gathered around the throne of the Lamb, singing, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!"

Finally, I think we're going to be surprised in heaven by the scope of healing we will encounter there. I know that most of us already think of heaven as a place of personal healing. And what a comfort it is to know that our loved ones, many of whom have suffered great physical or mental or emotional illness in this life, will be completely whole in the life to come. But when John lifts up the veil and lets us have a glimpse into heaven, we

see that the healing that will go on there is far broader than that of our own lives and the lives of our loved ones. For heaven is also a place where all the injustices of this world will finally be made right, where the lowly will be lifted up, the mighty brought low--as Mary foretold in her "Magnificat"--and where God's vision of a community of justice and peace and equality will finally hold sway.

I like the fact that the Gospel lectionary reading assigned for All Saints Day is the Beatitudes in Matthew. For these words call to mind not only those saints who have suffered physical or emotional illness in this life, but also all the martyrs and saints through the centuries who have suffered great evil or injustice for righteousness' sake. Listen again to these words and see what faces come to your mind as you hear them: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The prophecy of Jeremiah puts it well: "All my people shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

I wonder: do you have any thin places in your own life? Places where the veil between heaven and earth seems gossamer thin, places where you have the sure sense that you are standing on holy ground, communing with the saints who have gone before you?

You don't have to travel far to find such thin places. Indeed, there are times in worship itself when I feel like I am standing on holy ground, and the veil between heaven and earth grows strangely thin. Today is a day for the thin places. So if you feel that, stop. Take off your shoes. For the ground upon which you are standing may well be holy. And if you will but open yourself to the Spirit--the same Spirit who allowed John a glimpse into 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 who dwell with God in glory.

Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of All Saints'

Almighty God,
you have knit together your elect
in one communion and fellowship
in the mystical body of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord:
Grant us grace so to follow your blessed saints
in all godly and virtuous living
that we may come to those inexpressible joys
that you have prepared for those who truly love you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

We give you thanks, 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 or injustice, but only the great joy of worshipping you and serving you with all the hosts of heaven.

Lord, in your mercy ... hear our prayer

Lead us, we pray, 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 forevermore. *Lord, in your mercy ... hear our prayer*

Grant that the Church will always confess the faith of Christ as the Son of God. Strengthen her members firmly in that faith, to keep it whole and pure from generation to generation. We give you thanks for those who taught us the faith, for all who have led us in the ways of goodness and truth, We pray that our homes and our work may be places of holiness; that we may be an example to others. *Lord, in your mercy ... hear our prayer*

May the sick, the lonely, the homeless, those severely affected by COVID-19, and those who are near to death, receive comfort and hope in the Lord who desires to give them the peace and assurance of his Kingdom. Bless all at the front line of this pandemic who seek to relieve suffering. Keep them healthy, patient and constant in their work. *Lord, in your mercy ... hear our prayer*

Lord, give us a share in the inheritance of your saints in glory. May we at the last be part of the church which is victorious. We give thanks today for all your saints. *Lord, in your mercy ... hear our prayer*

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

Be strong though the peace that is yours in union with Christ Jesus.
Be of good courage, stand firm in the faith, do everything in love;
and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always.

Amen.