

The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

The Beatific Vision (All Saints' Day)

Reading: 1 John 3:1-3

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Suppose I ask you: “Why is that tree so tall?”

Today, you would naturally respond in the past tense (“it evolved over millions of years by natural selection”) or in the present (“it has unshaded access to the sun for photosynthesis”). But in the ancient Mediterranean and Christian medieval world, to go with these two answers there was often a third, using a future tense: “the tree is so tall because we’re going to make the mast of a ship from it”.

Now, a different, more personal question: **what is the meaning of your life**, my sister, my brother, my sibling in Christ?

Again, there are answers referring to the past: the meaning of your life is that God has lavished his love on you, says John. I love that: I think our world would be a better place if we used the word lavished on a regular basis. Or you could answer based on the present: you are a child of God, it says in verse 1.

But there’s another way of answering the question about the meaning of your life. As with the example of the tree which is tall because it will be a mast for a ship, this is an answer using the future tense. Wait for it, it’s breathtaking, glory-invoking, heart-satisfying. If you feel like the world is accelerating and you’re stuck in a rut, this answer will free you. Are you ready for it? If you’re anxious or lack motivation to live a new life, this answer will provide the life-changing audacity of hope.

Here it is: **the meaning of your life is that you will see God in Christ face to face, and be utterly transformed by that gaze**.

It’s called the beatific vision: seeing God-in-Christ and, says John, becoming like him, for we shall see him as he is. Think of Moses – he asks God if he can see his face, and God says no, you can’t see my face, but I’ll show you my back. And then Jesus says follow me, and we do, a long obedience in the same direction, following in his footsteps, seeing his back. But one day we reach journey’s end and he turns, and we see his face. As John Donne put it, Jesus shall “*turn to us and turn us to himselfe and turn us into like to himselfe*”[i].

If we exist for the beatific vision, it means we are a particular kind of being. As Christopher Watkin puts it, each of us is a “*self that exists in the mode of anticipation. It is a self ever displaced and exceeded by its desire for God. Such a self cannot be made into a commodity, possessed, or sold… There awaits for me a subversive fulfilment of all the tangled knots of my desires, assumptions, blind spots and predispositions that will surprise, delight and fulfil me in ways I never dreamed possible*.”[ii] There’s a famous passage in CS Lewis where he says “*There are no* ordinary *people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, someone on the way to the beatific vision is the holiest object presented to your senses*”.[iii]

I’m not claiming to understand exactly what heaven, or the new heavens and the new earth, will be like. I don’t believe we’ll dissolve into some sort of spiritual mist, or lose our humanity

or personalities. We won't become angels, we will be the human beings we were always destined to be. I think it's clear that there will be community, but looking at Jesus will be the heart of it. I think that every day in the infinite number of days that will be - although time is a fluid concept and when there's no sun "day" may have no meaning, - every day each of us will spot something in God that nobody else sees quite the same way. It'll be an endless adventure of discovering more of God, enjoying what we find, and excitedly telling each other about it. I think everything we try to do now through art, music, poetry, or philosophy is really just a rather clumsy rehearsal for that. Worship now is a foretaste of future transforming bliss, we are practising now for the world to come.

So 1 John 3:3 really matters. In verse 1 John has told us what we are now: the children of God, who are often unappreciated by those around us, but on whom God has lavished love. In verse 2 John has told us about the beatific vision, when we will see God in Christ face to face and be transformed into his likeness in character, in indestructibility, in liberty, in joy. But now in verse 3 John tells us that "**All those who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."**

And on the festival of All Saints', please don't miss the force of verse 3. To celebrate those who have gone before us, loved children of God who are assured the transforming glory of gazing upon God in Christ is a wonderful and cheering thing. But verse 3 insists that the All Saints' celebration of glory must result in a hope that will make a difference in our lives, here on earth. Hope is more than a word, more than an idea. Partly, this is about our attitude. Put it this way: if you knew a Michelin-starred meal was waiting for you this evening, wouldn't you put up cheerfully with a slightly droopy sandwich at lunchtime? Hope will make us **faithful, creative, courageous and open to the unexpected and surprising**[iv], because we know the best and most extraordinary is yet to come. But there are also decisions to be made along the way about what purity looks like. So purity means asking questions like these:

- If one day God will put all things to rights, so that there will be no more poverty or division or pain or unbelief, what purity is the audacity of hope calling me to in the world as it is, to make a little bit more like the world that shall be?
- If in the world that will be, I will be like Christ, does this help me become a bit more Christlike now in the world as it is?
- If in the world that will be I will love fully, even as I am fully loved, does this deepen my capacity for love now?
- If in the world that will be, I will see God in Christ face to face, does this make me more able to recognise and enjoy God now – the real God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the God of justice and mercy and self-giving love?

We are being called to formation by hope. The absence of hope will rot a community from the inside. But "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God", it says in our Gospel reading. And vice-versa – blessed are those who shall see God, for the hope of it is purifying their hearts, here and now.

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[i] John Donne (ed. Paul A Parrish), *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), Vol 6 p8

[ii] Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), pp577-578

[iii] CS Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2001), p46
[iv] One of our diocesan values: Travelling Well Together | The Diocese of Chelmsford