

ALL SAINTS/ALL SOULS

The first saints to be remembered by the early church were martyrs, men and women willing to suffer horrific and violent deaths to glorify God. By the beginning of the 5th century, there were so many martyrs there weren't enough days in the year to give each one a special day. So All Saints Day was introduced to remember all those too many to mention. They are too numerous to count, too many to name throughout the centuries, in every part of the world. We are moved by their silence, by their lack of remains.

Vasily Kandinsky, a Russian artist at the turn of the 19th century, brought up in the Orthodox church, painted a series of abstract works on the theme of All Saints Day – see *the front cover of the service sheet...* Kandinsky believed that if paintings were too easily understood, they would not be doorways into the spiritual world. He was trying to create in visual art the same kind of spiritual experience that can be encountered in music. My predecessor, the Rev'd John Baggley, wrote a book in the 1980s *Doors to perception: icons and their spiritual significance*, in which he reflected on this way in which art can offer a peephole into another world.

In our scripture reading today from The Book of Revelation, the author invites us to peek through the veil and glimpse something of heaven itself. His writings are full of the mystery and wonder that come from glimpsing things too holy to be contained by words. But we all have different visions of heaven.

In the King James Bible the word 'heaven' appears 327 times in the Old Testament and 255 times in the New Testament - in total 582 times. It is a word with multi-layered meanings. Most people today, including many Christians, struggle to believe in the idea of an after-life that conjures up cosy images of heaven as a place of endless leisure, drawn mostly from popular Victorian books of comfort for the bereaved. Neither are we so motivated by the idea of heaven as a future destination and reward.

Perhaps the word 'eternity' is more useful in these sceptical times. The Hebrew word translated eternity is used 48 times in the Old Testament. The Greek word translated eternal is used 71 times in the New Testament - a total of 119 times. Eternity is about the experience of a present reality rather than a future destination and reward.

In this thin time of heavenly bodies – celestial and ghostly - we are invited to embrace this deeper reality. When Jesus talked about eternal life, he meant abundant life/life in its fullness, not life that goes on and on without end.

When we peer through John's veil, what we see is that heaven is a very active place. The Greek word that is used here for 'worship' can also refer to work. People are busy worshiping 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. Just imagine all those who have gone before us – from this church and from our own families – busily doing what they were always best at in heaven...

The feasts of All Saints and All Souls are ultimately days of praise, days in which we remember that God is moving through our lives and the world, calling us, as God called those whom we call saints, to become more than we can imagine. And so, as we stand now in this place between heaven and earth, let us give thanks as we remember the names of all those we love and see no more, and let us pray that they, with all the saints, may continue to be busy in heaven.