I thought that Oxford in the summer was impossibly crowded but in the last few days it has felt even more so. Not that the streets have been heaving with visitors but rather that, in the week when we celebrate All Saints and remember All Souls, we have felt ourselves surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses: the air has been full of angels, saints, apostles, prophets and martyrs. We have witnessed them marching in company, like the procession of the faithful drawn from across the nations in our reading from Isaiah:

‘From every nation your countrymen will be brought on horses, in chariots and wagons, on mules and dromedaries, as an offering to the Lord, on my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord’

And like Isaiah’s countrymen, they are all heading in the same direction: towards the new heavens and the new earth, where, world without end, they will offer ceaseless praise of God. Again, as Isaiah put it:

Month after month at the new moon, week after week on the Sabbath, all mankind will come to bow before me, says the Lord.

We evoke this procession of the faithful every time we sing the Te Deum at Matins:

To thee all Angels cry aloud : the Heavens, and all the Powers therein.  
To thee Cherubim and Seraphim : continually do cry,  
Holy, Holy, Holy : Lord God of Hosts;  
Heaven and earth are full of the Majesty : of thy glory.  
The glorious company of the Apostles : praise thee.  
The goodly fellowship of the Prophets : praise thee.  
The noble army of Martyrs : praise thee.  
The holy Church throughout all the world : doth acknowledge thee;

These angels, apostles, prophets and martyrs are the heavenly host; the serried ranks of the faithful that fill every inch of renaissance paintings depicting the courts of heaven: we’ve all seen Fra Angelico paintings in which Christ or God the Trinity is enthroned in majesty, sometimes with our Lady beside him, and the hierarchy of angels, the glorious company of apostles, the goodly fellowship of prophets, the noble army of white robed martyrs - joined by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of popes, bishops, priests, monks and nuns – all crowned, mitred, haloed,
and bearing their glorious wounds – are gathered together as a massed choir, rendering to God everlasting praise.

It is an extraordinary vision – a bit crowded and not for someone who is claustrophobic or averse to anything too hierarchical, but the message is clear: the courts of heaven are not for the recluse but for the sociable: the saints and faithful departed form a society – as the Te Deum puts it - a glorious company, a noble fellowship. They form a communion, a commonwealth, an army united in praise, [the Church expectant and] triumphant. What sort of communion is this?

In a country where we still have a monarchy we’re used to those grand state occasions – a royal wedding, funeral or jubilee; the state opening of parliament - when the carriages, cavalry and bands; the lords, ladies, peers and pages all take their place in full regalia to mark the occasion with inimitable pageantry and style. We do these occasions well.

In fact, despite living in a democracy, we are still very keen on hierarchy, rank and regalia. The civic service and patronal festival we recently held to mark our Frideswide celebrations witnessed two similar processions entering the Cathedral: the Lord Lieutenant, the High Sheriff, the Mayor, the Vice Chancellor, the Proctors, the Judges, the mace bearer…. Followed by acolytes and crucifer, the honorary canons, chapter, bishops…. all arrived in their assorted, splendid uniforms, regalia, and vestments – complete with spurs, feathers, wigs, copes and mitres. As we processed round the tomb we were joined by choir, children and congregation to lay our rosemary branches on the shrine. The vergers plan this down to the last detail, with military precision – providing plans, lists and rubric. No one was left out.

Indeed, it seems that wherever we look we find ourselves in rank upon rank of offices: we acknowledge them; take our place; and process forward.

But what are all these hierarchies doing? These companies, fellowships, processions and positions with their different ranks and responsibilities?

I think we might begin to find an answer in a long drawing I was shown by the Curator of the picture gallery in Christ Church: it is a work by Titian, almost six foot long, and is entitled 'The Triumph of Faith'. It depicts a long procession, very similar to the ones I have described, but this time the first half of the procession begins with Old Testament patriarchs, prophets and
saints. In the centre is Christ, seated upon a chariot, holding up a cross of victory. Behind him, in
the second half of the procession, apostles, evangelists, martyrs, saints, fathers of the Church,
monks, priests and bishops follow. But heading up the procession, at the very front, a few steps
ahead of these various worthies is a couple; an ordinary man and a woman with no uniform or
regalia save for a fig leaf. They are strolling along hand in hand, she leaning affectionately against
him, like a courting couple out for a Sunday stroll, oblivious to all that is going on behind them.
Adam and Eve are there to represent the saved – of the Old and New Testament, the living and
the dead; all those who have been purified, sealed and forgiven by the death and resurrection of
Christ, who is riding in triumph in the very centre. The drawing is meant to proclaim, I think,
that whatever has gone before or is yet to come, is centred upon Christ, and only finds its
meaning, its place – indeed, its very life, in Christ.

The hierarchies and ranks are therefore overturned; God’s order is not our order: it is not an
order of position and power or a carefully graded procession of dignitaries – but a fellowship, a
communion, united not by distinctions of rank or honour, but by Christ. It is what the epistle to
the Ephesians, in our second lesson this morning, refers to as the ‘body of Christ’.

This is, first of all, because, in fact, the only distinction that matters - in the beginning, now and
in the age to come, is between divine being and created being; between God, the Creator, who
brings everything into existence from nothing and gives it life, and his creation, which is
completely and utterly dependent upon him. Christ stands at the centre for he alone can mediate
between God and Man; between the divine and human, since he alone is at once God and man.
Having sinned and fallen, it is only in and through him can we live, breath and have our being.
The hierarchies become meaningless; the ranks redundant; the orders rather ridiculous: for we
have only one status before God and, like Adam and Eve, that is of created, sinful, dependent
human beings; all is a matter of gift and grace.

What unites us, then, is not hierarchy but humility; what matters is not rule but obedience; what
brings order is not differences of rank or position, regalia or attire, but faith, hope and love. We
might as well wear a fig leaf and wander almost naked, for in Christ, as Paul puts it, there is
neither male or female, slave or free, Gentile or Jew. All, regardless of sex, social status or
religion, are united as children of the one heavenly Father, as recipients of his grace and love,
mediated to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, and shed abroad in our hearts by his Holy Spirit. We are
brought together in communion and fellowship, one with each other and with the communion
of all the faithful departed, the saints, apostles and martyrs, only in and through the Body of Christ.

It is this which the central section of the Te Deum describes when it turns from the angels, prophets, apostles and martyrs to praise Christ: his incarnation, saving death, and resurrection to God’s right hand on high, to open the kingdom to all believers.

With the Te Deum, then, we can only humbly pray in this week of All Saints and All Souls, to be joined together in the Body of Christ, the body of the Son, the one mediator between man and God, with the communion of the saints and the faithful departed, praising our Lord and Saviour.

As the Epistle to the Ephesians, which we read this morning puts it, God

‘Raised Christ from the dead, and enthroned him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all government and authority, all power and dominion, and any title of sovereignty that commands allegiance, not only in this age but also in the age to come. He put all things in subjection beneath his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church which is his body’