

All Saints, Year A

The feast of All Saints began in the early centuries as a “catchall,” remembering martyrs whose names were not known and who therefore did not have their own festivities. It was introduced in Rome on May 13, 610 as the “Feast of All Holy Martyrs”, but was transferred to November 1 for the universal Church in 835. By then it included all the saints. The reason for the new date may have been a practical one. It seems that so many pilgrims came to Rome for the feast that it was moved to the fall when more food would be available after the harvest.²

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14

Written on the island of Patmos to which Tertullian, in his writings in 200 AD, tell us the apostle John was exiled “after being immersed in boiling oil and suffering no hurt”. Many commentators place the date of composition in the 80s or 90s and tradition places the date as late as AD 95.²

2I, John, saw another angel In the first verse, John saw four angels standing on the four corners of the world. The earth is perceived as a rectangular surface with favorable winds coming from the sides and unfavorable ones coming from the corners. The angels were holding back the unfavorable winds. The winds are released as agents of divine punishments.² **come up from the East,** This protecting angel appears from the direction of the rising sun, the source of light and the place of paradise. God’s actions in history traditionally came from the East. It was also from the east that the messiah was expected.² **holding the seal of the living God.** According to the widespread custom of the ancients, oriental lords impressed the seal of their ring on their belongings. Whatever was so marked belonged to the lord and was under his protection. In Ezekiel 9, the angel makes the mark on the foreheads of those who have avoided idolatry; a mark which causes their lives to be spared. Whoever bears the “seal of the living God” will thus be His property and under His protection.² **He cried out in a loud voice to the four angels who were given power to damage the land and the sea,** Those in charge of the fury of the winds.²

3“Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees until we put the seal on the foreheads of the servant of our God.” The seal of the Spirit is applied to the righteous before the seals of wrath are applied to the wicked. The protective mark in Ezekiel 9 is literally tav, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The ancient Hebrew form of the tav was +, a cross—a fact which was not lost on the early Church which saw it as a prophetic reference to the sign of the cross used by Christians. It is possible that the use of the sign of the cross in baptism may have originated in this passage.² The Fathers of the Church saw this mark as symbolizing the character that Baptism impresses on the souls of the faithful to show that they are destined for eternal life. Thus, the persons preserved from harm are the Jews who were converts to Christianity: their Baptism marked them out from those Jews who rejected Christ and were not baptized.¹

4I heard the number of those who had been marked with the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand This is 12 x 12 x 1000. Twelve is a number of perfection in the physical and human world. The second twelve corresponds to the 12 tribes of Israel. 1000 indicates a very large number. This is the ideal Israel, Israel as it was meant to be, in all its perfection, symmetry, and completeness. The 144,000 then symbolizes the multitude of the elect whose number is known to God alone.² The 144,000 can refer only to a part of the Church—those Jews who, by becoming Christians, made up the original nucleus of the Church. The Church admits these on the same basis as all those who become Christians later without having had to pass through any stage of Jewish

observance. In this scene all those of Gentile background who become Christians over the course of history are explicitly not included. They will appear in the vision which follows.¹

9After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. This is not only Jewish Christians, but all members of the Church. The first group came only from the people of Israel. The second group comes from all nations. Obviously, more than 144,000, which could be counted. Probably an allusion to the countless descendants promised to Abraham. The fact is that Jesus the Christ came to save the entire world.² **They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes** A symbol of baptism. They have been cleansed of sin and its effects.² **and holding palm branches in their hands.** A sign of victory and of the thanksgiving of the elect. The Jews celebrated the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) which commemorated the cleansing of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus in 164-165 B.C. This celebration included the waving of palm branches because there was destroyed a great enemy out of Israel. Jesus attended this feast and on Palm Sunday he imitated Judas Maccabeus's action by cleansing the Temple of its defilement by the moneychangers.²

10They cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb." The elect give thanks to God and to the Lamb (sacrificial meal) who saved them. They ascribe to God and to the Lamb what Rome claimed for the Caesars.²

11All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. The whole court of heaven joins in the acclamation of the saints.² **They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God,** Official public worship in Scripture never shows the participants sitting at prayer; public prayer is always performed in the reverential positions of standing or bowing down.² **and exclaimed:**

12"Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen." The victory of the Church is depicted—of the entire Church, made up of people from the four points of the compass.¹

13Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, "Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?" The "white robe" is not a consequence of entry into heavenly glory, but rather a condition. In fact, this image describes the very state of being a Christian—the white robe is a gift of Christ at the moment when man becomes a member of the Church. But there is the danger of losing this gift.⁵

14I said to him, "My lord, you are the one who knows." He said to me, "These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; This refers to the great tribulation. The great trial will mark the end. The early Church did not expect to be miraculously preserved from all hardship in this life. They knew that they would be called upon to suffer persecution and tribulation.² **they have washed their robes** While many would consider them to be only the martyrs. It would be better to identify this crowd with the members of the Church who have remained faithful throughout the final crisis—the vision concerns the whole Church on earth.² This great crowd includes all the saved and not just the martyrs.¹ **and made them white** The white robe, symbolizing baptismal entry into the Church, can become stained through sin.² **in the Blood of the Lamb."** The Lamb is Christ.³ This last comment says that these have been made saints—not by their own work but by the work of the "lamb"—and that the same can happen to us.⁴ The "blood" is a symbol of the death of Christ and its salvific worth.⁵

1 John 3:1-3

According to tradition which goes back to the second century, St. John wrote his 3 letters in Ephesus, on his return from exile on Patmos, around the years AD 95-96. The authenticity of this first letter is well documented from early on. Detailed analysis of the text confirms that it was written by the same person who wrote the fourth gospel. According to a tradition passed down by St. Irenaeus (AD 180-199), the apostle John spent the last years of his life in Ephesus. From there he ruled over the various churches of Asia Minor. Since there are none of the usual opening greetings and no special words of farewell, it is thought that this is a kind of circular letter sent to all the Christian communities in the region.²

Beloved:

1See what love In the truest and most absolute sense, God's gift of love has been the gift of His only Son as savior of the world. It is this gift that has 1. opened heaven for us, and 2. given us the sacrificial meal so we can eat of it and join in His family covenant.² **the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God.** The grace of our Creator is so great that He has allowed us both to know Him and to love Him, and moreover, to love Him as children love a wonderful father. It would be no small thing if we were able to love God in the way that a servant loves his master or a worker his employer. But loving God as father is much greater still.² When God gives someone a name he is not simply conferring a title but is causing the thing that the name indicates, for the word of God is efficacious, it does what it says it will do. That is why St. John adds the next line.⁷ **Yet so we are.** Being children of God is an essential feature of a Christian's life.⁷ Eating the sacrificial meal joins us with God in His covenant.² **The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.** This relation to God is shown in the attitude of the world, which gave the same treatment to the disciples as it did to Jesus. Also, failure to recognize the real presence in the Eucharist denies His power to bind us into His covenant.²

2Beloved, we are God's children now; At the time of the writing of this letter, there was division in the Christian community. Some believed Jesus was not fully human; others suggested that he was not fully divine. This letter recounts that some of these members left the community. Indeed, the author identifies them as the antichrist in 2:18-23. In contrast, those faithful—then, now and in the future—who profess that Jesus is the Christ belong to the family of God's children.⁶ **what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.** The seeing of God is what every Christian strives for but this vision is a hope, not a certainty. The reality of this hope is shown in the Christian life of virtue. By living the virtuous life, the Christian already begins to live the eternal life by imitating Him who is pure.² The image of God manifested to the Christian in this life is seen through faith. The vision of God for which the Christian is destined, however, is much more intimate and immediate.⁵

3Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure, as he is pure. This means interior purification from sins.⁷ Note that John uses the present tense when he talks about our need to purify ourselves. The practice of virtue is an ongoing thing and has its own inner dynamic. If we stop living this way or put it off until some future time, there is nothing virtuous about that at all.²

Matthew 5:1-12a

There are two versions of the Beatitudes, the one in our reading today and the other in the gospel according to Luke. In Matthew, the Beatitudes are part of the "Sermon on the Mount" and are addressed to the disciples as well as the crowds. In Luke the Beatitudes are contained in the "Sermon on the Plain" and are addressed only to the disciples.⁶ A beatitude is defined as a declaration of blessedness on the ground of some virtue or good fortune.²

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, This is the posture of oriental teachers.² **his disciples came to him.** Commentators have postulated that the crowd formed concentric rings around Jesus with the twelve making up the innermost ring.²

2He began to teach them saying: The following are not different people or kinds of people but different demands made on everyone who wants to be a disciple of Christ. All of the Beatitudes promise us salvation in the next world but the spirit of the Beatitudes gives us peace in the midst of tribulation in this life. The Beatitudes put spiritual good on a much higher plane than material possessions.⁸

3“Blessed To understand the meaning of blessing we must look to the Old Testament where it is conceived as a communication of life from God. With life comes vigor, strength, and success, which brings one peace of mind and peace with the world.⁽²⁾ **are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.** Emphasizes less the literal lack of possession than the lowly condition of the poor—they have no arrogance or assertiveness and instead are servile in nature. Christians are called to serve one another.² Those keenly aware of their spiritual poverty and need for God’s mercy. They are like the lowly of the OT, seeking only the riches of heaven. While this includes the powerless and the materially poor, it refers primarily to those who recognize their moral weakness. With a humble spirit, they live inwardly detached from earthly goods.⁹

4Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. These lament mankind’s earthly plight. They recognize that one cannot, with human effort alone, reach the blessedness of heaven. Disciples who mourn are likewise troubled by the injustices of the world and grieve over their sins.⁹

5Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. The “meek” are those who patiently suffer unjust persecution and who remain serene, humble and steadfast in adversity, and do not give way to resentment or discouragement. The virtue of meekness is very necessary in the Christian life. Usually irritableness, which is very common, stems from a lack of humility and interior peace.⁸ Meekness is not weakness, but humility and faith in God especially during trials.⁹ **for they will inherit the land.** This is usually understood as meaning our heavenly fatherland.⁸

6Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, A righteous person is one who sincerely strives to do the Will of God, which is discovered in the commandments, in one’s duties of state in life and through one’s life of prayer. Thus, righteousness in the language of the Bible, is the same as what nowadays is usually called “holiness”.⁸ **for they will be satisfied.** Those who seek and desire God’s righteousness receive it as a heavenly gift.⁹

7Blessed are the merciful, Mercy includes being understanding towards other people’s defects, overlooking them, helping them cope with them and loving them despite whatever defects they may have. Being merciful also means rejoicing and suffering with other people.⁸ **for they will be shown mercy.** The two works of mercy most emphasized by Matthew are almsgiving and forgiveness.²

8Blessed are the clean of heart, Clean of heart as opposed to external purity gained by ritual washings.² For ancient Hebrews, the heart signified the center of the person and the source of love and obedience—it was the origin of every act and decision.⁽⁹⁾ **for they will see God.** The inwardly pure behold God in the simplicity of faith. They will see him “face to face” in heaven.⁹

9Blessed are the peacemakers, Those who reconcile quarrels. Reconciliation is a Christian office often recommended in the gospels.² More than a mere absence of conflict, true peace stems from reconciliation with God.⁹ **for they will be called children of God.**

10Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, Persecution for righteousness is persecution that is endured in order to maintain good relations with God by obedience to His

will.² Jesus envisions New Covenant disciples in line with the Old Covenant prophets, many of whom were abused and killed by their kinsmen. They suffered maltreatment for their unwavering fidelity to God and their denunciation of personal and social evil.⁹ Every Christian who is faithful to Jesus' teaching is in fact a "martyr" (a witness) who reflects or acts in accordance with this Beatitude, even if he does not undergo physical death.⁸ **for theirs in the Kingdom of heaven.**

11Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. There are only eight beatitudes — this is an expansion of the previous verse.² The Beatitudes are the conditions Jesus lays down for entering the Kingdom of heaven. This verse, in a way summing up the preceding ones, is an invitation to everyone to put this teaching into practice. The Christian life, then, is no easy matter, but it is worthwhile, given the reward that Jesus promises.⁸

12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven." Everlasting life in the kingdom of God.²

Some of the information for this commentary was taken from: (1) "The Navarre Bible: Revelation," (2) The St. Charles Borromeo online bible study, (3) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2006" by Martin Connell, (4) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1991" by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi, (5) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (6) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers:2009" by Mary A. Eble, (7) "The Navarre Bible: Catholic Epistles", (8) "The Navarre Bible: St Matthew", and (9) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of MATTHEW" With Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.