

The Feast of All Saints (observed)

November 6, 2022

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

Scripture Readings

Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

"Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

1 John 3:1-3

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

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

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

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

“Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

In the Church's traditional calendar, November the 1st is set aside as “All Saints' Day” which we usually observe the first Sunday of the month. No, it's not the day for y'all to be thankful for your favorite New Orleans football team. It's to remember the people of God, and the picture and promise we get in our reading from Revelation today.

Who are “the Saints”? Not just some particularly dedicated or holy people that stand out from the rest of the Christians, like Mother Theresa or St. Paul or St. Patrick. The saints are all believers in Christ. And so, All Saints Day is a time to commemorate all the people of God, living and dead, all around the world, on Earth and in Heaven, who make up the Body of Christ.

On this festival, many Christian congregations remember the faithful who have died during the past year and celebrate with anticipation their and our transformation on the Last Day, the day of resurrection. It's an observance that goes way, way back to the earliest days of the Early Church, to the 2nd century: they speak of a day set aside “in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the benefit and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps.” We give thanks to God for the departed, and by thinking about them, we strengthen the living.

That's the earliest Christian attitude, and that's the Lutheran attitude towards saints: we thank God for what He did for them; we thank God for what He worked through them for us and others; we look to them as good examples we can imitate in the Christian life. We remember the saints who have gone before us and this memory helps remind us and show us who we are. The difficulty with remembering saints is we can often look at them rather than see through them.

We remember our loved ones because we love them; we remember other saints because we respect them. But reason this is something for the Church to celebrate and include in worship is not just because of the people we miss and mourn, but what they have to tell us about Jesus and how we see God at work. We can look at them, but we should also look through them to see Jesus.

A wonderful image for this I once heard from another pastor was that it's like a stained glass window. There's a beautiful window in the chapel at the St. Louis seminary with images of Timothy and Titus, two New Testament saints who traveled and preached with Paul. They're good examples for pastors-in-training to consider, of course. But in the morning chapel service, when the sun shines through those windows, the light of the stained glass falls onto the pews and lights up the faces of everyone sitting there. We can look at the window and see the men, we can look at their lives and what they did as an example, but we also see the light that streams and passes through them to light us up too.

The light of Christ that we see in all saints, in all believers, is the real benefit of this remembrance. We remember those who have gone before us to thank God for them, and to be strengthened to imitate them. We pray that we can end our days in faith too, and that the same light of Christ will shine through us so that others can see it – so that when looking at us, others can see Jesus. Because that is who is working in us and through us, God doing His work in the world in and through His people.

And it reminds us that this life, the struggles and temptations and mundane everyday routines of this life, are not the end. Heaven is the real homeland of Christians, whose primary citizenship is in the kingdom of God, not the nations of the earth. Sometimes we talk about the “Church Militant” as those of us on earth still struggling in the trials, temptations, and hardships of life in a fallen world,

versus the "Church Triumphant," those who have died in faith and are now at peace with Christ until the second coming and the resurrection. But Hebrews 12 talks about that separation in another way: the Church in a foreign land (the church militant, here and now) versus the Church in the homeland (the church triumphant, at rest with Christ).

The Church here and now, in the foreign land, is a sort of a colony, a community of expatriates. In more modern terminology, I might even say we're a community of refugees. Like the Vietnamese who settled here on the Gulf Coast after fleeing their home during the war a generation ago, like many fleeing violence and persecution still today from Africa, from the Middle East, from Asia - they have become a community of strangers in a strange land, and so the Christian Church is in the midst of this world. But a refugee is different from other immigrants in one important way; for a refugee, there is still hope and desire for returning home. There's a symbol used among certain refugee groups and by the UN refugee service: a key has become a powerful symbol of their status - keys to the homes they were forced to flee, homes they may never see again or may not even exist anymore. But they have kept the key in hope and memory.

We have the same kind of hope. We are expats, refugees in this world, citizens of God's kingdom but living in the midst of the world's nations. But we have an even better hope: we know that we are going to go home. And we know the one who holds the key to our home, not us but Christ. At the beginning of Revelation, Jesus speaks to John and he says, "I am the first and the last, the living one; I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I hold the keys to death and hell." He holds the keys that shut and lock death and hell from us forever; he holds the keys that open the kingdom of God to us. When he shuts, no one can open; when he opens, no one can shut. And he opens eternity up to you. He opens forgiveness and salvation up to you. He opens the door to our true, everlasting home. For us, a key is not just a symbol of a home we've left behind, but the dwelling place already prepared for us to enter.

For those who die in faith and are with God, the traditional wish "May they rest in peace" is certainly true! There is no peace greater than being at peace with God, and being in the presence of God. For those who die in faith and are with God, it is certainly hard for us who are still in the foreign land, who miss them and suffer that loss, but as the cliché line says, they are certainly in a better place. The division of the Christian Church in here vs. there, or militant vs. triumphant, or abroad vs. at home, is a temporary state that will come to an end.

He prepares a place for us there, a place with him, and he will bring us to be with him. There is indeed "life after death" - but even that is not the end. There's yet another life after that "life after death," the resurrection promised when Christ returns and puts all things right. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, he promises we too will be raised to everlasting life - his own resurrection body is the proof and deposit of this. Jesus was saving us and this world in the totality of our being: body and spirit, the entire living soul and, moreover, the very planet itself. God is committed to this physicality. He created it. He clothed Himself in it. He saved it and resurrected it. Jesus got out of the grave, and so all those united to Him will get out of the grave, and be transformed. God transforms the body and the spirit. As Christ is, so we shall be.

What our resurrected bodies will be like is, for now, as mysterious as the incarnation and the Trinity. Nevertheless, as we read in 1 John this morning, "we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him." We will be like him, we will be with him, and we will see him when he comes again. When that happens, we will not just have gone to heaven; heaven will have come down on earth.

We give thanks to the Lord for His victory over death and the grave both for those who are now with Him in glory and for ourselves even as we press forward in faithfulness awaiting the Day when our eyes will see Him. And until then, we continue to take part in the communion of all saints, the entire Church and Body of Christ present before God to receive His gifts and grace.

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, as Hebrews says it, we receive Christ's body and blood knowing that, in this Sacrament, we are given the forgiveness of sins which carries with it the promise of the resurrection of our bodies. In this communion with God and with all saints, we find this truth, that we are gathered with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven as we sing "holy holy holy," and again as we pray again afterwards: "You have given us a foretaste of the feast to come in the Holy Supper of Your Son's body and blood. Keep us firm in the days of pilgrimage that, on the day of His coming, we may together with all Your saints, celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

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
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: Thanks be to God!

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: Amen.