

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT  
 on All Saints' Day Sunday, November 6, 2022 by the Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton  
 Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18 Psalm 149 Ephesians 1:11-23 Luke 6:20-31

Our Prayer Book identifies All Saints' Day as one of the 7 Principal Feasts of the Church Year, along with Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, Christmas and Epiphany. So I wonder, how important is All Saint's Day in your thinking, praying and daily living?

As we seek to expand our appreciation of the many mysteries involved in the celebration of All Saints, let's begin by focusing on the meaning of the word saint. This week I spoke with a Costco employee whose name tag read, Brendan. I asked him, "How does it feel to be named after a saint?" His immediate response was, "Well I'm no saint, that's for sure." How many of you would say, "I'm no saint?" Often, we think of saints as people who are perfect or who have done miraculous things and we know that none of us fit that description. But this is not what the Bible means by the word saint.

In the Bible, a saint is a person who has a relationship with God, God's Holy Spirit dwells within them. Many of the letters to churches in the New Testament are addressed to the saints in a particular place, like Jerusalem, or Corinth or Rome. Paul refers to an ordinary congregation of Jesus followers as saints. These letters begin by affirming the gifts of all the saints there. They also point out the ways in which those saints are not living as Jesus taught people to live. In other words, saints stray from God's ways and are called to keep beginning again, learning and growing in the ways of Jesus for as long as they live. Yet, with all their imperfections and sins, they are still God's saints.

For example, in today's Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul begins by saying: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints." By this he means their love for all the imperfect people in the local house churches in Ephesus. If Paul was here speaking to us this morning, he would refer to all of us here as saints because we are all part of a community who, with God's help, are seeking to become more fully the saints God created us to become at this time and place in history.

Just a couple of verses later in Ephesians, Paul expands the meaning of his use of the word saint. He prays "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe." Here Paul refers to both saints on earth and our ancestor saints who lived in ages past, who have died and are now part of the communion of saints with God in heaven. Paul goes on to describe the power of God present in this larger communion of saints. He says,

"God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And God has put all things under Christ's feet and made Christ the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

Wow! Do you begin to see the cosmic implications Paul outlines here? The Ephesian Christians were struggling as a persecuted minority group, living in a culture dominated by the pagan, affluent, self-centered, economic and military power of the Roman Empire. Paul says to them, don't be discouraged! I want you see the larger context of hope in which you live. You are surrounded by a

much larger and more powerful reality than the Roman Empire. You are also living in God's all-powerful, Cosmic presence which is greater than all earthly political and military powers. And your relationship with the Holy Trinity also connects you with all the people who have sought to live as followers of God from the beginning of creation. They now have found their place of eternal life and joy with Christ in heaven. And you are part of this multi-generational, eternal community of people whom God continues to sustain in love in heaven and around the world right now. This is the hope of your present and your future, that through the Resurrection of Christ, you also will be sustained through whatever life brings and finally you will be raised to new life after your death and share forever in the fellowship with God and all the saints in heaven.

As we sit here this morning, I suspect that most of us are carrying some deep fears and anxieties. In addition to the challenges in our personal lives, we are aware of many destructive wars going on in the world and of nations threatening more wars; aware of a stressed global and local economy, with a limited supply of food and fuel and supply chains of goods; we are aware of elections this week in our perilously divided and vulnerable nation.

At this moment, Paul is saying to us the same things he said to the Ephesians. He is trying to expand our imagination to include the hope we have, in the middle of all these stressful challenges, because we are also living in the Presence of the Risen Christ, we are bound together with living saints here on earth and by God's grace, with all the saints who have ever lived and are now rejoicing with God in heaven. We are living in a much larger and more powerful Reality than the news media recognizes or talks about. Because of Christ's resurrection, we are always people of hope, even though the present may feel very threatening.

The book of Hebrews gives us another image of this larger communion of saints in which we live our daily lives. Hebrews 11 includes a long list of spiritual ancestors or saints who lived through difficult times with faith and trust in God, people like Abraham and Moses and David and the prophets. Then Hebrews chapter 12 continues: "Since we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses..." The image used here is of a Roman colosseum or a modern football stadium filled with spectators. The people watching us as we live our daily lives are the saints who have gone before us. They are praying for us, cheering us on, down on the playing field of our daily lives, as we seek to live as faithful followers of Jesus, embodying love for God and all our neighbors, in the midst of a hostile and unstable environment.

Hebrews goes on to say, "since we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews reminds us that we don't just passively wait for God to take us to heaven. We have a mission to fulfill while we are on this earth, a race to run with perseverance, seeking to embody and share the love of Christ in the midst of the struggles of our generation. And the saints who have gone before us are cheering us on. We are not alone. The cosmic power of our Trinitarian Creator is stronger and more ultimate than all the destructive forces of darkness that surround us.

This vision we celebrate on All Saints Day is a reality which we literally and mystically participate in every time we celebrate the Eucharist. The priest says, "Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who forever sing this

hymn to proclaim the glory of your name...and then, as we sing the “Holy, Holy, Holy” we are singing along with all the saints, the same hymn which Scripture tells us is sung by all who are gathered in heaven.

The All Saint’s Day Eucharist is also a time we remember and thank God for the special people who have been inspiring examples to us of what it means to live as followers of Jesus. They are worshipping alongside us today. These may be people who taught us about Jesus by their words and examples when we were children or young adults. They may be people we learned from through their writings, and people we know at this time in our lives. Who are the saints who have been most influential, most inspiring, most helpful to you in your spiritual journey? At the end of the Prayers of the People today we will have an opportunity to thank God out loud for some of the special saints who have influenced our spiritual journey.

Every year, All Saints Day invites us to remember this larger context of the communion of saints in which we live every day of our lives, surrounded with the love and prayers of Christ and all the saints. And with joy, we look forward to joining Christ and all the saints when we have finished our mission on earth and are raised by the mercy and love of Christ into eternal fellowship with our larger family who have gone before us into God’s Presence in heaven.

To deepen our communion with all the saints this week, I’ll suggest two spiritual practices to experiment with: First, I invite you to take the Scripture insert home, so you can read the Ephesians passage every day this week and keep reflecting on how this ancient perspective we are given on the power of God and the communion of saints might make a difference in the way you think and live this coming week.

Second, in our last hymn this morning will be singing: “for the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.” So to prepare ourselves to live more fully as God’s saints this week, I invite you to use this little prayer practice every day: begin, now by closing your eyes for a few moments... in the silence, be aware in your imagination that we are surrounded by the glorious presence of Christ and all the saints. Enjoy and savor being surrounded by their love and prayers for you, for all of us here, for the whole world, right now....

In the silence of your heart, ask Jesus what one or two little changes he might be inviting you to make in your life today, and this week, so you can take another step in practicing your love for God and your neighbors as one of God’s saints?....

Almighty God, you have knit us together in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in al virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Adapted from Collect for All Saints’ Day.)