



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Feast of All Saints
Sunday, November 1, 2020

Scripture Passages: Revelation 7:9-17 & Matthew 5:1-12

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the many blessings of being an Anglican is the belief or doctrine of the Communion of Saints. I just love All Saints day. Always have. It's a beautiful thing that we set aside a day to celebrate, remember with love and appreciation those who have gone before us in the faith.

In much the same way as we like to know where we come from in our biological families it's a similar idea in terms of our faith family. One of the things that families do is form us. Through loving example and practical help and even sometimes gentle correction, our families help us – as my kids say – learn to adult. That's kind of what the Communion of Saints is about too.

Remembering the example of the saints who have gone before us – the holy but not necessarily perfect and the ordinary saints as well – those folks in whom the light of Christ has shone brightly in our lives - helps to form us, to bring us to maturity in our faith and action in this world.

In the very early days of the church All Saints was a day set aside to remember the people – the martyrs - who lived extraordinary lives of devotion – many of whom died for their faith. Gradually though, through the passage of time the meaning of saints has broadened to include all believers – living and dead. So All Saints Day is a remembrance of the fact that we are a family – the Body of Christ - all connected by our faith – both those who are present and those who are past. And this web of connection is called the Communion of Saints. We are connected across the ages, across cultures and across the world by our faith.

All Saints is also one of those days in our church that looks backwards and forwards. Not only do we remember the lives of all the saints who are gone from us into God's loving embrace, we also affirm that even though we're parted from them now, we will meet again in heaven one day.

The apostle John, in his later life, dreamed dreams and saw visions on the Isle of Patmos and recorded them for an early church suffering persecution and martyrdom. His writings are full of the mystery and wonder that come from glimpsing things too holy to be contained by words and in our reading this morning, for All Saints, John shows us a glimpse of something of heaven itself. He says that in heaven there will be people gathered from every single nation and tribe and language on earth, all giving praise to the Lamb who sits on the throne singing, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and might be to our God forever and ever!" From his vision we can see that Heaven is a worshipping kind of place.

But when John lets us have a glimpse into heaven, we see something else too. We see healing. The healing that will go on there is far broader than that of our own personal lives and the lives of our loved ones. For heaven is also a place where all the injustices of this world will finally be made right, where the lowly will be lifted up, the mighty brought low and where God's vision of a community of justice and peace and equality will finally be a reality.

The beauty of the heavenly vision that John gives us reminds me of the words from one of my favourite hymns – Jerusalem the Golden:

“O sweet and blessed country, the home of God’s elect; O dear and future vision, that eager hearts expect: even now by faith we see thee, even here thy walls discern; to thee our thoughts are kindled for thee our spirits yearn.”

Oh how I miss singing that hymn today.

It’s terrific that the Gospel lectionary reading assigned for All Saints Day is the Beatitudes in Matthew. Because these words call to mind not only those saints who have suffered physical or emotional pain in this life, but also all the martyrs and saints through the centuries who have suffered evil or injustice for the sake of their belief in Jesus as the one who united heaven and earth – as the one who showed us what God’s love looks and feels like and what it can do through us as we try to build the kingdom of God here and now.

A vision of what a healed humanity through the commitment and work of all of us ordinary saints might look like is in these beatitudes.

Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, we are to be those who are full of humility and wonder. We are to be willingly emotionally exposed and open enough to fully mourn, mourning the state of the world, the failures and losses of our siblings, and the loss of our own innocence.

We are the ones who are to be meek, not seeking power by dominating others but attaining true power that is only found in the weakness and vulnerability of the cross of Christ.

We are to hunger and thirst for righteousness, yearning for what is right, holy, and good from the deepest part of our souls.

We are to be merciful not ruthless, pure in heart not corrupted, peacemakers not instigators, if necessary, the persecuted instead of the persecutors, and reviled and despised as the consequence of standing with the oppressed, but also as a consequence of humility.

You see, the healing that goes on in heaven will be a healing not only of body, mind, and spirit, but a healing of the entire social order, as the Lamb who is seated upon the throne – Jesus – takes on the role of the shepherd, leading his faithful people to springs of water where God wipes away every tear from their eyes.

That's quite the vision for the children of God – the saints of God. That's not a me-first, individualistic vision by any means. This is a vision of the kingdom that is whole and healthy and is the very definition of blessing and God's peace.

And I don't know about you, but in the world in which we live right now: of loss of many kinds because of this Pandemic – loss of life, loss of security, loss of fellowship; in a world of devastating climate change and gut-wrenching poverty, of racial inequality – and where political conflict might devolve into societal unrest – I feel this vision doesn't just have future importance, it also has a present urgency to it.

Because, when, as one commentator has written, “we imagine a world so transformed by God that an innumerable crowd of different people from different places speaking different languages gather together as one, we ought to be inspired to action, especially when that vision is so discordant with what we see in our everyday lives. But we ought to be moved not to will ourselves to become better people but to trust that God is already drawing us together, that God's promises are already made true even in a world that has stopped making sense. On the ground of God's promises, we can't help but act and hope for something better.”

So it's not so much a vision but an action plan for the saints. As ever, that's good news.

So happy All Saints' Day. Blessings on your remembrances of the beloved saints of the past and how they have inspired the saints of the present and may God give us the grace and the strength to do the same for the saints of the future.

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