

All Saints' Day (Observed) November 6, 2022

Revelation 7:2-17

1 John 3:2-3

Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All Saints' Day is the Church's way of honoring those who have gone before us in the faith. It is a tradition that dates back to 835, when Pope Gregory declared that the church should observe a day of solemnity in honor of departed believers in Christ, those who have obtained the beatific vision of life in heaven, hence the reading of the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. The saints are those who live the full realization of life in Christ. The marking of All Saints' Day is a healthy departure from the almost exclusive honoring of martyrs. Not that martyrs should not be honored, but it is just as important to honor those who lived, and lived well, in faithful devotion to Christ. Sometimes the two coincide, but often times, saints live peaceable lives without facing persecution or threats. All Saints' Day makes room to honor both parts of our history. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the Feast of All Saints' is celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost, and the Copts of Africa observe it on September 11th as the start of their new year. Lutherans... that's us, honor the occasion by remembering those saints in our own congregation who have passed into a new kind of glory.

We live in an age that does not honor much of anything. In fact, it can be said that our whole society, even those who profess Christ within it, are at war with the past, the present, and the future. This behavior transcends politics and religion. The past is frequently idealized by Christians who long for the familiarity of the world they once knew. Many would do well to heed the advice of the sage, "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions."¹ On the other hand, the past is demonized by those who seek to annihilate all meaning from life, and the best place to start is the past which cannot fight back. The present is an age of discontent. The utter lack of appreciation for what it means to be alive, now, at this very moment, is due to the emptiness of a life lived, consumed by consumption, conformity, and contempt for creation. The rejection of what *is* can manifest in different ways, equally radical. There is the radical desire to upend the order of the political, social, educational, and economic structures, and replace them all with some utopian vision. Or there is the impulse to let those same structures descend into chaos, seek the refuge of the cloister, and view everything from the safety of a cave that offers an "Us vs. Them" perspective. The future is already considered lost by those who are myopically concerned with the West. They have grown faithlessly pessimistic, even as God continues His work throughout the world. It is as if they have forgotten that the Jews once defeated Egypt and Christianity conquered Rome. None of this behavior honors the past, present, or future, and it does not honor Christ who came to redeem it all.

Perhaps what we really need is to reconnect with who we are made to be in Christ. Primarily, our identity is in Christ, but we should not diminish the value of looking to the fruit of the vine which is precious in its own way, precious because of what it draws from the vine. Christ is the source of goodness, and those who are in Christ will produce good fruit. Taking some time to focus

¹ Ecclesiastes 7:10

on the saints does not risk devaluing the sacrifice of Jesus. I trust that your faith in Christ is on firmer ground than that. If All Saints' Day is a recognition of those who are living the fullness of the beatitudes, we can also recognize some who embodied those beatific characteristics through life on earth. They are the manifestations of Christ in the world, which is what it means to be the body of Christ, the Church on earth. As we live out our faith, we ought to embody the life of Christ. We are made in His image, and part of living a sanctified life means resembling Him in our actions. Some people are exceptional examples for us to follow, for they help us to understand what it is to be Christ-like. This means to live out the Sermon on the Mount. More than pleasant sounding platitudes, the Sermon on the Mount is to be a guide for a way to live, and live well, as we become what Christ makes us.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." One of the most important people in the history of the church was St. Augustine, but we would not have had St. Augustine without his mother, St. Monica. Augustine recalls how his mother would weep for him and pray that God would lead young Augustine to the truth.² She could have turned angry and bitter against Augustine, turning him even further away from the one true God. Instead, she remained humble in spirit, and she was faithful that God would act. When St. Monica was near death, she had a final request of her sons, that they would remember her when they were at the Lord's Altar. As we commune, the unseen reality is that heaven and earth converge in time and space, and we share the table with Monica and Augustine, partaking of the same body and blood of Christ.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The brilliant Lutheran clergyman and hymnist, Paul Gerhardt was all too familiar with mourning. In his life, he lost four out of five children in infancy and his wife at an early age. Out of the depth of a suffering soul, Gerhardt produced a storehouse of lyrical beauty. Here is a verse from one of his hymns: "Take heart, have hope, my spirit, and do not be dismayed; God helps in every trial, and makes you unafraid. Await His time with patience through darkest hours of night, until the sun you hoped for delights your eager sight."³ A depth of mourning that would have broken lesser men became a source of blessing to the generations who have followed Gerhardt, drawing comfort in his words. We know that God makes use of us as we comfort each other throughout this life we live together. But God has also connected us with the saints of the past who can inspire us to endure hardship and adversity with an eye toward the light that God alone can give.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Living on a place called "Rat Island" would probably qualify someone as being meek. Born in one of the poorest parts of Brazil in 1914, Maria Rita, at age 13, started serving the homeless and the beggars of her neighborhood by giving them haircuts and treating their wounds. She eventually earned a nun's habit, taking on the name Dulce in honor of her mother. As a nun, she housed the poor in abandoned houses on Rat Island, only to be evicted. Dulce ended up taking her 70 patients to her former convent, where she was only allowed to remain with her patients if she tended to the chickens. She agreed, then promptly fed the chickens to her hungry friends. In 1960, on those very same grounds, the lowly hostel was developed into the 150 bed Hospital Santo Antonio. Now a 1500 bed complex, the hospital still serves the poor as a medical, social, and educational center. St.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 3:12.

³ Paul Gerhardt, "Entrust Your Days and Burdens", LSB #754.

Dulce Pontes embodied this beatitude as she served others in meekness, but she changed the world around her. True to her form, she did not boast in her achievements, instead noting that she engaged in small acts of love, but Jesus transformed them into great works.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” In the latter half of the 14th century, the plague was ravaging much of Europe. St. Catherine of Siena was born in 1347, and she lived through some of the darker days of the period. While she is primarily known for her scholastic contributions, her political involvement, and for being posthumously named a Doctor of the Church, she was also someone who fearlessly cared for the sick, consoled those dying of the plague, and imitated God by burying the dead who had been left to rot by their frightened relatives. Though Catherine was a keen observer of human nature, and all too familiar with the sins of others, she came to understand that sitting in judgement of others was a hidden sin in her life that was keeping her from being merciful to others. It was her confrontation with this sin that helped her to see her own need for God’s mercy in Christ, which led her to extend the same mercy to those around her.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Maria Goretti lived next door to Giovanni Serenelli and his son, Allesandro. Allesandro was twenty when Maria was only eleven. For months, Allesandro had been attempting to make advances on Maria which she refused. On July 5, 1902, Allesandro tried to force her to submit to him, but again Maria refused, saying it would be a sin against God. In retaliation for being rebuffed, Allesandro stabbed young Maria 14 times. She lived for 20 hours after the attack. In that time, as she lay dying in the hospital, she was asked if she forgave Allesandro for the attack. Her response was, “Yes, for the love of Jesus, I forgive him. I want him to be with me in heaven.” Twenty-eight years later, and now a Christian, Allesandro went to Maria’s mother to beg for forgiveness. It is a vile thing to pervert the purity of the innocent. But for Maria, the victim of such perversion, the purity was seen in her forgiveness, and she located the proper source for forgiveness in the love of Christ.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” In this day and age, we need people who have a passion for life, a biblical sense of justice, and a desire for peace above ideological assertiveness. In American history, few individuals embodied that more than Martin Luther King. The nation was lurching toward a race war, and radical groups were intent on facilitating the violence. The Reverend King preached a different message. His was an appeal to our higher ideals, both politically and spiritually speaking. King was criticized by some of his fellow clergymen for being in cities where he was an outsider. In his own defense, which he rarely offered, he said, “Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid... Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”⁴ In a nod to Socrates, King notes that the world needs nonviolent gadflies, men who can help others rise above the dark depths of racism and prejudice into the heights of the shared brotherhood of all men. Sometimes, the peacemaker must be prepared for false accusations of warmongering, of undermining public order, and breaking laws in order to call attention to what is gravely unjust.

There was no greater task in human history than making peace between God and man. Not because God was at war with man, but in many ways, man was at war with God. In coming to make

⁴ Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”.

that peace reality, Jesus was accused of many of the same things King would come to be accused of. It is not all that dissimilar for those who are persecuted for taking a righteous stand. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Richard Wurmbrand was a Lutheran pastor in Romania under communist rule in the 1960’s. While imprisoned himself, he saw many of his fellow believers of all denominations beaten, starved, mocked, and murdered. He said that in the persecutor, they saw Paul. In the abusive jailer, they saw the guard in Philippi who converted. In those who tied Christians to crosses and smeared them with excrement, they saw the crowd at Golgotha which would later beat their own breasts in sorrow. In an incredible series of sentences, Wurmbrand captures the spirit of grace: “It was in prison that we found the hope of salvation for the communists. It was there that we developed a sense of responsibility for them. It was in being tortured by them that we learned to love them.”⁵ Perhaps the greatest blessing to come from such persecution is learning what it is to love the stranger, to love that which seems to be farthest from us, to be able to say, as Jesus and Stephen did, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

All of the saints I mentioned today were all too human. They all had their faults. They all needed the forgiveness that comes from Christ, just like we do. But I am humbled when I think of their stories, and there are many others who I could have mentioned, countless people produce as the fruit of the Vine. I am humbled, but I am also strengthened and inspired by their faith. I am strengthened because the source of their strength is the same Spirit that strengthens me. If we are shaken by what we see going on around us, how can we expect to stand in the face of torture and threats of death? Our faith is stronger than to despair over the current state of affairs. Our political philosophy is not found in the shallow morass of inanity found on websites or television networks. It is found in the Truth of the Sermon on the Mount. It is found in the sacrificial life of Christ which is the fullness of the Sermon on the Mount. And it is manifested in the life of His holy ones, the saints of the past, present, and future.

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

⁵ Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook Publications, 2017), p. 79.