

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Sermon, November 1, 2020

All Saints Day

Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9, Psalm 23, Revelation 21:1-7; 22:1-5

All Saints Day is celebrated November 1 by most parts of Western Christianity, and on the first Sunday after Pentecost in the Eastern branches of Christianity. The **Catholic Dictionary** tells us the day commemorates all those who have gone to heaven and attained the "Beatific Vision." What is the Beatific Vision? I'm glad you asked; I'll be getting to that later (*we talked a little about this during the last Hymn Sing, and in more detail from time to time over my 23+ years here, but the repetition won't hurt! Historically, it can be argued that the Beatific Vision is THE grandest hope of the Christian, and sadly, too few modern Christians even know what it is! But again, I'm coming to that later in the sermon*). A large part of the celebration of All Saints' Day is the fundamental belief that there is a spiritual communion between those who have died and gone on to heaven and those faithful still living here on this earth; in theology this has been classically referred to as the 'Church Triumphant' ... those who have attained their heavenly crowns ... and the 'Church Militant' ... those who are still fighting the good fight of faith here in this world, doing all we can to make this world a little more like heaven, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer each week ... *"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* That petition in the Lord's Prayer means in part that we are to do all we can to fulfill this prayer, we are to do all we can to do God's will, to make this world a little bit more like His kingdom, **which, by the way, includes casting your vote** ... your **intelligent** and responsible vote ... this Tuesday to try to put those in office who will help make this nation better, not bitter; loving, not livid; law-abiding, not corrupt. Just as another aside ... an election is not so much a popularity contest as it is a chess match ... we want to move the best people available into the best places they can be in order to help us all fight the good fight to see *"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"* ... but, I digress.

When we confess in the Apostles' Creed, *"I believe in the Communion of Saints"*, this is what we mean: The Communion of Saints is the belief shared by all Christians ... Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant ... that all of God's people, the Church Triumphant in heaven and the Church Militant on earth, are all connected in a fellowship, a communion. As we sing in the third stanza of *"The Church's One Foundation"*, a stanza I often have trouble singing without tears welling up -- *"Yet she on earth (i.e., the Church Militant) hath union, with God the three in one ... and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won (i.e., the Church Triumphant)."* Yes, I believe in the communion of saints.

Pretty much all Christians, and especially Roman Catholics, believe those in heaven are just as alive as you and I ... in fact, if anything they are even MORE alive than we are here in this world ... and that those saints don't stop praying. The saints don't stop talking to God once they are in heaven. If anything, they talk to God more! And because of our *"mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won,"* the faithful Catholic believes his/her prayers can be joined with the prayers of the heavenly community of Christians, so he/she takes it to the next logical step and prays to the dearly departed saints, asking them to intercede with God on the petitioner's behalf. Now, for the most part, Protestants don't fully understand that (*and I'm generalizing*), because **we**, haaar-umph, don't pray to anyone but **God**. Now, part of the reason is that we honestly don't know if the heavenly saints can hear us, as the Bible is just silent on this issue. Too often, though, I think we Protestants have been quick to caricature and unfairly critique the practices and beliefs of our Catholic brothers and sisters; let's not be too hasty. After all, don't we ask others around us to pray and intercede for us? Of course we do. (*When someone asks me to pray for them or a loved one, I don't respond, "How dare you ask me to pray for you, don't you know according to 1 Timothy 2:5 there is only one Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ?!!!"*) When faithful Catholics pray to the dearly departed saints, whom they hold to be very much alive in the presence of God (*again, if anything, the saints are much more alive, as in full of life, than we are on earth!*), they are only asking the saints to intercede for them when they pray to God in the same manner that we would ask our friends to pray for us. And the saints have the added advantage of dwelling in the immediate Presence of God! They don't hold the saints are divine, omnipresent or omniscient (*some might, but that is not the official teaching of Catholicism*); they can't be sure their prayers to the saints are always heard. But I can appreciate and understand their motivation.

Those of you who've lost a spouse or another close loved one may be able to relate to this on a personal level. In spite of my Protestant roots, I've found myself talking to my late wife many times over the years, especially when dealing with issues raising our children! I've often asked "Saint Ann" to speak and/or plead to God on my/our behalf (*Since 2016, I also pray to St. Francis ... that'd be Saint ALAN Francis, not St. Francis of Assisi ... my late father's name is Alan FRANCIS Clark*). Now I don't know if Ann and/or Dad hear me every time I talk to them, or even if they hear me at all ... again, the Bible is just silent on this issue of whether or not those who have gone on before have the ability to witness the goings-on down here. But if they are in the presence of God (*which I do believe*), and if they are able to witness some or all of what is happening here on earth (*which I honestly don't know*), it certainly doesn't hurt to ask them to put in a good word for me, especially for the children/grandchildren ... *because I believe in the communion of saints*.

As mentioned at the outset, All Saints Day commemorates all those who have gone on to heaven and attained the Beatific Vision. Now, what exactly is the Beatific Vision? What do you think is, or will be, the ultimate

experience of the Christian? The classic ultimate hope of the Christian church for centuries has been what the theologians call this Beatific Vision, or the Viseo Dei. The Beatific Vision is the promise in the Word of God that some day we will not only see a heavenly city... and we *will* see that city, with streets of gold and pearly gates ... and we will not only see and be reunited with those we love ... and we *will* see and be reunited with them ... and we will not only see and converse with all the saints who've gone on before ... and we will do that as well (*some of you may remember my conversation with my oldest daughter, then seven years of age, the night after her mother's passing in 1999 ... she was convinced that Mom had asked for Moses' autograph by then, because she believed in the communion of saints!*), but do you know what else we're going to see? We are going to see God.

Don't you want to see God? I want to see God. I want to see him so badly I can almost taste it! It is just a bit frustrating, isn't it, that we gather here to worship God and to learn about God, and we try to live our lives with the aim to please God in all that we do, and yet we never see Him. To be sure, we see reflections of Him in each other, we catch glimpses of His glory from time to time in our lives and perhaps in our worship, we occasionally sense and feel His presence, but we never actually **see** Him. Sometimes it can be hard to entrust our lives to someone whose face and presence we can't see, but He is invisible. Why is He invisible?

The problem is not with our eyes ... it is with our hearts. Jesus spoke of the Beatific Vision in the midst of what are called the Beatitudes, when He said, "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*" Has anybody here seen God? Is anybody here pure in heart? (*I won't ask for a show of hands.*) Our hearts are *not* pure. However, in Christ, we are in the process of being *made* pure. God is remaking us, cleansing us, restoring His image in us, in order that we may one day be able to stand in His presence and see Him. We are in the process of growing into sainthood, a process that does not end until we get heaven. The theological term for that process is "sanctification;" the end result is our "glorification." We are a people being sanctified ... being made holy, being made into *saints*. To use John's imagery in Revelation, we are being prepared as a bride getting ready to meet her husband! I John 3:2 -- "*Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*" That is the glorious end result of our redemption in Christ. *We will see God, and we will be like Him.* We will be whole, complete, healthy, strong, pure, good, holy, **rested**, full of life and vitality, fully restored, fully redeemed. And we won't see some burning bush, or some pillar of cloud, but we will see God Himself, face to face. *That is the Beatific Vision.* I believe that sight will so fill our hearts with satisfaction that every earthly aspiration we have ever had will be fully satisfied; any earthly satisfaction will seem but a dim memory.

Our Scripture readings today speak of that point on the horizon toward which God is leading all creation. Isaiah speaks of the eventual swallowing up of the cover spread over all people, the shroud of death. He then speaks of the grandest church pot luck supper ever (*remember those? It's been awhile because of this pandemic*), the victorious banquet for all the redeemed that will be set on God's holy mountain. The psalmist speaks of a Table God sets for us in the presence of our enemies, even our last enemy, Death (*that is part of the significance of the Lord's Supper we observe today ... it is a sign and pledge of the heavenly Table set for all the family of God*). John in Revelation sees the descent of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, with God dwelling among us to wipe every tear from our eyes. It'll be a place where mourning, crying, death and pain are no more. The language of John here pushes the limits of metaphor in an attempt to describe the indescribable, a reality otherwise unknown ... the death of Death. In these texts we have the divine promise that one day death will be swallowed up forever.

By the way, do you remember why John points out this little detail that there is no longer any sea? We last talked about this Easter Sunday. Two things: **First**, the sea was a literary symbol of threat and destruction for the Hebrews. The Jewish people were not advanced in seafaring, but their enemies were ... and they often came to attack Israel from the sea. Also, devastating winds that would destroy crops, violent storms that would threaten their welfare and property, all would come in off the Mediterranean. So, the sea was a symbol of threat, death and destruction. **Second**, for John the sea was a source of isolation, it was a barrier of separation. He was exiled on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea when he received this vision; he was separated from those he loved by the sea. John is telling us the new reality for which all the saints are destined is one in which all threat, destruction, all separation from our loved ones, will be no more! We will be safe, secure, together, and God Himself will be there in our midst and "*...He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.*" When God wipes away tears, it is the end of tears! All those things that cause us tears in this life will be no more in heaven. No more crying, no more disease, no more pain, no more death, no more disappointment, no more separation from those we have loved and lost.

The final stanza of our closing hymn (*another stanza which I often have trouble singing without tears welling up*) which, appropriately, we will sing after the Sacrament, reads: "*Be still my soul, the hour is hastening on when we shall be forever with the Lord. When disappointment, grief and fear are gone; sorrow forgot, loves purest joys restored. Be still my soul, when change and tears are past, all safe and blessed, we shall meet at last.*" And in that day, when change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we will say with all the redeemed of all time, what the prophet Isaiah foretold (Isaiah 25:9): "*Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, that He might save us. This is the LORD, we have waited for Him, let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation.*"