



Solemnity of All Saints



Date: Sunday, November 4, 2018 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** B

First Reading: Revelation 7:2–4, 9–14

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 24:1b–4b, 5–6

Second Reading: 1 John 3:1–3

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 11:28

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:1–12a

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Today we remember All the Saints. This feast started out as the Feast for All Martyrs and was celebrated on 13 May in Rome. The Eastern Church adopted this as early as the year 359. It was so popular at the time it was celebrated during the Roman harvest so that enough food for the feasting would be available. But as other regions of the Church adopted this feast they included more and more people and non-martyrs until finally Pope Gregory VII, who was pope for 12 years from 1073-1085 suppressed the 13 May Feast and declared that the 1st November would be the day it would be celebrated and that it would include All the Saints. In South Africa our bishops have transferred this feast to today.

We are of course familiar with the idea that during the year the Church often recognises one or two Saints on specific days. There are those saints that are popular from every age and community of the Church, and perhaps a couple of not so-popular ones but whose life and witness the Church thinks it is important for us to remember especially on a specific day each year. But there are so many more Saints than just those. And today we celebrate all of them.

The book of Revelation, which we read for our first reading today was written to bolster the faith of the early Christians persecuted by the Roman empire. It uses fantastic imagery and symbolism to conceal its true meaning from the Roman persecutors. Without saying so too plainly, the book offers hope and tells the faithful that even their persecutors are restrained by the hand of the invisible God whom the persecutors won't acknowledge.

Today we read how the one Angel commands the four angels who are protecting the world from the four winds of destruction to wait until those marked with the seal of the living God are gathered before God's throne. People from every nation, race and tongue are now one in praise and worship.

The angels and elders bow down before the divine throne while those dressed in white robes praise God. We are told that their robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. That is to say, through the redemptive act of Christ dying for our sins they received the gifts of life and grace that brought them holiness.

This scene, of multitudes of saints worshiping in heaven, tells the troubled Christians that their God is really the true God, and truly in charge in the long run.

In a week where we have witnessed terrible acts against the Jewish people, murdered in their Pittsburgh synagogue whilst at prayer, it is important to recall that St John records from his vision that there are two groups described as being present in the multitude: one from every tribe of the Israelites, and another from every race, nation, people and tongue. John understood that God's plan calls for the salvation of all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. This universalism was obnoxious to some Jews then, just as it appears to be to some Christians today. But that is God's promise to us. St John predicts the eventual reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, and so encourages his readers, whom he calls Saints, to embrace each other in this life as they will in the next.

I wonder though, what it is that all the Saints have in common?

I think Sainthood is a result of sanctity, and that means that as all baptised people, we are all called to a life of holiness and thus, to aspire to Sainthood. That is the basic Christian vocation – common to us all.

St Bernard of Clairveaux who died in 1153 once asked this question about today's feast:

Why should our praise and glorification, or even the celebration of this feast day mean anything to the saints? What do they care about earthly honours when their heavenly Father honours them by fulfilling the faithful promise of the Son? What does our commendation mean to them? The saints have no need of honour

from us; neither does our devotion add the slightest thing to what is theirs. Clearly, if we venerate their memory, it serves us, not them. But I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning.

Calling the saints to mind inspires, or rather arouses in us, above all else, a longing to enjoy their company, so desirable in itself. We long to share in the citizenship of heaven, to dwell with the spirits of the blessed, to join the assembly of patriarchs, the ranks of the prophets, the council of apostles, the great host of martyrs, the noble company of confessors and the choir of virgins. In short, we long to be united in happiness with all the saints. St Ignatius of Loyola told us that we should trust our deepest desires. And when we remember the Saints we come in to contact with our desire to be holy, to be like them. We need not be afraid of such a desire. Impossible as it may seem, if we allow ourselves to trust that desire we will slowly live more and more in accordance to it.

When we celebrate All Saints we are celebrating all the people in the past, and whom we have known in our own lives, who are holy. But we do more than that. In celebrating them during the Mass we are reaching forward into eternity and celebrating with them the great present – that mystery of the Eucharist. We are not alone in time when we celebrate Mass but for an instant the past and the future meet in the present as we pray the great Sanctus and praise God together.

Although John in the second reading emphasizes that we are already children of God, he affirms that what we will be in the future will go beyond anything we can presently imagine. We will see God and in coming to know and love God, we will be like God. Anyone, he says, who has this kind of hope has to be motivated to live as a child of God even now. We must, like all the saints, try to be like Jesus. This means making our own the qualities and attitudes praised in the beatitudes and so be holy.

What is it to be holy? I think it is a conscious and continuous choice to try and deepen our relationship with God. Whatever decision we take, whatever we allow ourselves to think, if we can try and build up God's kingdom rather than our own we will be on the way to holiness. Becoming holy often involves thinking about others before one thinks of oneself. But it is not to become a doormat for Jesus. We know that God desires great things for each of us. The greatest, perhaps, is that we become more like God. How do we do this? I think we have some practical clues in our gospel today where we read about the beatitudes.

These are attitudes that if we can adopt, we can be assured of being in God's kingdom. We have all heard them before. So perhaps today, why not just try to consciously work on adopting one of them. I suggest the first. In beginning the beatitudes with a mention of the poor in spirit, Matthew is not denying that many of Jesus' followers were literally poor, but rather he is emphasizing a fundamental human attitude – the first necessary one in fact. Poverty of spirit like meekness and gentleness suggests humility, a profound awareness of one's own fragility and limits and thus of one's need for God. If we are self-sufficient and see no need outside of ourselves, how can we be open to others? If we recognise our dependence on God we can cultivate that greatest gift and way of being, gratitude. This will help us to escape the temptation to be proud – a temptation that is often the way the Devil traps Christians and turns them away from God.

Let us pray today that we might recognise our need for God. Let us recognise our desire to be holy, and be one with the Saints before us. We know in our hearts that when we are holy, we are whole. We are not fragmented or split internally – serving two Masters. We can stand before God and praise him, because we are grateful for everything he has done for us. We can remember, just as the early Christians who were persecuted, that even amidst trials and sufferings it is possible to be holy. We remember the Saints not because they need remembering, but because we need to remember them so that we can receive the courage, the grace and the gifts from God to live our lives and become more like Christ.

Holiness, for most of us, is not attained overnight – but rather it is the persistent re-turning and re-orientating our lives to God. Like a GPS God is constantly directing us and encouraging us to be a Saint. Sometimes people say that to sin is to be human, but I think to be fully human is to be holy. God created us for himself, and when we live that way, as if we belong to God, we can praise him fully and others will see God in us. And is not that how we recognise the Saints among us?

God bless us all and Happy feast!

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