

October 31, 2021 - All Saints (observed) - Sermon

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

“For All The Saints”

The celebration of All Saints Day began early in the history of the Christian Church. The date has been moved around on the calendar throughout history but for the last number of centuries it has fallen on the first day of November. Our culture has largely forgotten that the word “Hallowe’en” comes from a contraction of “All Hallows Eve” which was meant to be a commemoration of the goodness of God and not a chance to get into mischief. The major theme of All Saints Day is the assurance we have been given that there will be a general resurrection of all those who have died and this event has been promised to take place at ‘the end of time’. Various writers in the Bible have tried to describe this event, including Isaiah, but words cannot do justice to the picture. Suffice it to say that the objective of God is to restore the Created order to its original intention and include within it all of the redeemed souls - the saints - to share in the eternal life promised through Jesus.

Isaiah’s picture of this event describes a huge feast and the lifting of a shroud. This prophecy was spoken to exiles whose had been forcibly removed from their homeland. “By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, there we wept as we remember Zion” is one of the lamenting Psalms which was penned during that time in the life of the nation Israel. It was predicted that the life of misery and famine would come to an end and the glory of God would come to its fullness. “A feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines....” is meant to describe the most incredible meal we can imagine in order to convey the idea that God’s blessing will be abundant and wonderful. A ‘setting to rights’ of all that has gone wrong in the world will be part of this great and glorious day toward which the feast of All Saints points. The hurts will be healed and tears will be wiped away when the resurrection takes place. In order to accomplish this there will be, we are told, some sifting out of those who have turned their backs on God but God’s mercy will not exclude anyone unless they have chosen to be excluded. The ones whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of Life will be ushered into the New Jerusalem which is described as a city prepared as a bride adorned for her husband in the final chapters of the book of Revelation. The promise from Isaiah points to a time when war and strife, pain and suffering, loneliness and fear will end and a time of feasting and justice will enter into the existence of those who are part of the household of faith. The saints that the Church has recognized, and some whom the Church has not recognized, are those in whom we can already see elements of this future time as if a light from elsewhere were shining through the lives of these people. Once again an author attempts to describe the undescrivable and once again the picture is of God’s glory being revealed.

In his description of the end times John records the astounding statement, “Look! The home of God is among mortals”. Not since the Garden of Eden has God dwelt among humanity in this way. We are also told by the writer, John, that God will wipe every tear from their eyes and that death will be no more. (See verses 3, 4 of Revelation 21) We are promised this state of life if we have been brought into the family of God through baptism and have been made part of that ‘great cloud of witnesses’ spoken of in the letter to the Hebrews. The symbolism in the New Jerusalem is that just as the old Jerusalem was the place in which God’s Temple was located this New Jerusalem, which has no Temple, will be the dwelling place of God. Again we learn that God is in the business of restoring the Created order to its original intention and will include within it all of the redeemed souls - the saints - to share in the eternal life promised through Jesus.

The images painted in the readings from Isaiah and Revelation contain a ‘coming home’ kind of feeling but this time home is coming to us and not the other way around. There is a yearning in many people for a place away from their current situation. A yearning for some place that is better than this and we often attach that feeling to the past rather than a future promise. My father would regularly remark about his desire to ‘move back home’ after he and my mother moved away from the place where they grew up in order to raise their family. My brothers and I would listen but not understand this yearning because we were already ‘at home’. It would seem that my father was yearning for a time in his memory when life was better which sometimes meant that he missed the ‘better’ that was all around him. As I’ve grown and moved away from the place of my birth I begin to understand a little what my father dreamed of in looking back to a simpler time. However, I have learned that the past is not where the answer to that yearning lies but it is through my relationship with Jesus that thy yearning finds its true fulfilment in a future promise. This is a yearning for a place of perfection which we sometimes believe was in the past but is truly found in the promise of God. Unfortunately, in a way, while we yearn for this place of perfection which has been promised to us we live in this world of imperfection and must face the challenges brought to us. We can be helped in our response to this challenge by thinking about the Saints who have been recognized by the Church throughout the ages. Through their lives and witness we can learn more of how to be ‘light, salt, and yeast’ in this troubled and hurting world while keeping our minds fixed on that ‘home far away’. By allowing these influences to shape our lives we become more able to cooperate with God’s plan of restoring the Created order to its original intention which will include within it all of the redeemed souls - the saints - to share in the eternal life promised through Jesus.

As I think of these things I find some help in the story of the raising of Lazarus through which we

are given a glimpse into an intimate relationship which Jesus had with a family from Bethany. Lazarus was the brother of two sisters, Martha and Mary. While Lazarus is not mentioned often in scripture Martha and Mary are mentioned in the Gospels. They lived in a village outside of Jerusalem called Bethany and, it would seem, they often hosted Jesus and his disciples in their home when he came to Jerusalem. When Lazarus fell ill they contacted Jesus for help. It is puzzling why Jesus did not respond to the request right away and this delay has caused much discussion among Christians for centuries. There is little doubt that Jesus cared deeply for this family and he lent his support in many ways. His prayer at the tomb gives a hint of the elements of God's plan which guided Jesus' actions. He said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." The raising of Lazarus was meant, at least in part, to declare to the public that: Jesus is the One who was sent by God to restore the Created order to its original intention which will include within it all of the redeemed souls - the saints - to share in the eternal life promised through Jesus. The family of believers, those known to us and those whom only God knows, will be blessed with the true home in which God will 'wipe away every tear' and in which a feast will be experienced.

So, today we celebrate the feast of All Saints and we give thanks for the many people throughout history and within our own lives who have shone with the light of Christ to let us know there is a true home for us which will be brought into reality by Jesus the Messiah of God in God's time.

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