

Readings for the Feast of All Saints

FIRST READING: Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14

A reading from the Book of Revelation:

I, John, saw another angel come up from the East, holding the seal of the living God. He cried out in a loud voice to the four angels who were given power to damage the land and the sea, "Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees until we put the seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." I heard the number of those who had been marked with the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand marked from every tribe of the children of Israel. After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb." All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God, and exclaimed: "Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen." Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, "Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?" I said to him, "My lord, you are the one who knows." He said to me, "These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 24:1bc-2, 3-4ab, 5-6

Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it. For he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.

Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD? or who may stand in his holy place? One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean, who desires not what is vain.

Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD, a reward from God his savior. Such is the race that seeks him, that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.

SECOND READING: John 3:1-3

A reading from the first Letter of Saint John:

Beloved: See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure, as he is pure.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Matthew 5:1-12a

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Feast of All Saints

Many times, over the more than forty years of my ordained ministry, people have asked me how one gets to be a saint. I always answer in more or less the same way. Lead an exemplary life. Be heroic in your pursuit of virtue. Live your faith in Jesus then die. Place yourself in God's hands. This is good advice for life, but sainthood is a separate path. The dead soul is in the arms of a committee. The committee gathers all available information on the individual who is up for canonization. From the grave, the candidate must perform at least two miracles. There is one person called the devil's advocate who collects all the dirt and assumes that the miracles are illusions. The procedure is ancient and hidden. No one knows how the committee deliberates or decides. They promulgate their results to proclaim sainthood. Does this mean that only those who get declared saints are in heaven? No, we trust God's love not the deliberations of a committee.

English has a unique history of development. Years ago, there was a PBS program, The Story of English by Robert MacNeil. English, as we speak it, has been influenced by many languages. It is primarily a Germanic tongue. Influences have been Gaelic, Latin, Norse and mainly French. Yes, French. Have you ever wondered why we eat beef instead of cow, venison and not deer and pork and not pig? Our words for the meat of an animal are closely related to the French names for cow, deer and pig. The names for the critters themselves have Germanic origins. Saint is another name like that. It comes from the French word Sainte meaning holy. As far as I know English is the only language that has a separate word for someone in heaven. The rest of languages use the word, in their own tongue, holy. There are stages for canonization; blessed, venerable and, finally, holy.

Where it's true that to be canonized, "Holy," one has to be dead, to seek and to strive for holiness is to be our life-long task. Jesus said, "Be holy as the father and I are holy." First, only God is holy. Second, God has made us all in God's image and likeness, God is already part of our very being. Most importantly, God sent Jesus to be our Savior. Through faith, God has redeemed us and given us the promise of eternal life. We are in God's loving arms not the arms of a committee. I believe that my beloved dead are with God now sharing eternal life. I have entrusted them and they entrusted themselves to God through faith.

Why we revere Saints or, better, the Holy Dead Ones, needs some explanation too. I've always felt sorry for St. Anthony. He has to be the hardest working dead person. Eternal rest hasn't been granted to him. How many millions of people pester him daily and at all hours to find all their lost stuff? Which St. Anthony too, of Padua, of the Desert, of Siya or the Great? Personally, if I were St. Anthony, I'd be St. Anthony the Hermit. Hermits, at least, live all by themselves. I mention this to give pause to our piety. It's important to find some perspective on what eternal life is all about.

Each of us has come from God, being made in God's image and likeness. We live as God's beloved child. God has loved us to life and faith. God leads us through this life to eternal life as God promised. How do we know that this is true? My favorite saints of the New Testament are Peter and Paul. It's not their heroic lives that I cite, but their great sin and subsequent salvation. Peter was an impulsive man prone to be hot-headed. He tried to persuade Jesus to abandon his mission to die on the cross. He cut off a man's ear with a sword. He betrayed Jesus three times when Jesus needed him the most. Paul was a bounty hunter and hit-man who hunted down and killed those who believed in Jesus. Yet these two men gave their lives to minister to Jesus' Church, spread the gospel through out the Mediterranean world and died the death of a martyr. Clearly faith in Jesus transformed them into devoted missionaries. We call them apostles.

There is a set of books called Butler's Lives of the Saints. Alban Butler lived in the 1700s and collected the stories of many people we call saints into a multivolume set. One of these has been my favorite for years, St. Christina the Astonishing. Her story is unusual. She lived during the 1100s. She was orphaned as a child and supported herself by tending farm animals. As a teen, she suffered some sort of seizure that put her in a deep coma. She was laid out for her funeral when she "came to." Those who gathered to morn were astonished that this young woman apparently came back from the dead. Whereupon, she climbed up into the rafters of the church in order to escape, "the stench of sinful, human flesh." Bathing was uncommon in those days.

After she had been coaxed back down to the ground, she spoke of the visions she had, in her coma. She saw people she knew in both heaven and hell. After this, she joined a convent. Her spiritual director wrote about her unusual personality. When people approached Christina to speak with her, she would curl up into a ball. As a result, people actively sought her out for direction. I guess that from being curled up as a ball, she gave good advice. It's good to keep in mind that in days without cell phones, television and the internet, people still had an attraction for reality shows.

My light-hearted story is about as far away from pious notions as I can get. Here's my point. We revere the saints not to see their holiness; it's to know God's holiness. God transformed the sinners Peter and Paul through faith. God received this astonishingly odd Christina. God's gift of salvation through Jesus' cross forgives our sins. God's love led them through this life. If God's love could do all that for them then, what can God's love do for sinners like you and me now? The eternal life that Jesus resurrection promised them is also promised us. We share eternal life now, with God, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Christina and all our beloved dead ones. We are all alive in God's love.

Sainthood may come only after we die. Eternal life will begin when this life ends. God's life we share now with each other and the saints. God's love makes us all one. God so loved the world that he sent his son to be our savior so that all who believe may share eternal life. Remember that I will be with you always until the end of the age. Holiness, God's presence is now; in, with and through us. We live in God today and glimpse the promise of eternal life and the kingdom of God.

There are also four scripture readings today. The book of Revelation terrifies some people. They fear the images of evil, the death of the faithful, the number 666 and, especially, the Beast. The book of Revelation tells the Good News like all the other books. God wins at the end of the book. Salvation comes through the Lamb. The symbol of the lamb refers to the Passover lamb that is slaughtered, roasted and eaten at the Seder Meal. Its blood was collected and then smeared on the lintel of the front door of the Israelite's homes so that the Angel of Death may pass over. Jesus is the Christian Lamb of Sacrifice. This passage reminds me of worship. It's a lot like mass. People are all gathered together standing before the Lamb; gathered in the presence of Jesus. They wear white robes, vestments. They pray and sing together. They stand, kneel and bow as one. Their robes are made white with the crimson blood of the lamb. Jesus forgave our sin by shedding his blood on the cross. His blood made us clean of our sins. Every time I've read this passage I think of liturgy. The images in it always remind me of going to church.

At the time Revelation was written, the Church experienced persecution, perhaps of the Roman emperors Nero or Domitian. The message is symbolic, like poetry. The images are fantastic to obscure the gospel's meaning from the persecutors. Some of our children's nursery rhymes sound simple and cute, but behind them are the experiences of war, pestilence and death. "Ring around the rosy; pockets full of posies; ashes, ashes we all fall down." The events of horror Revelation tells, cannot overcome the hope, promise and triumph of God's plan. The promise of the Kingdom will triumph over the COVID 19 pandemic too.

Things to be revealed; the television season was cut short this year because of COVID 19's spread last spring. There were no cliff-hangers this season. We didn't have to wait three months to see what would happen to our fantasy heroes. Instead we wait for the insipid summer replacement reality programming to end and the next season to begin. The ads for them have started; they'll begin soon. We seek these simple revelations. What will come will come to light. We will see, soon, our favorite shows.

We really don't know what will happen next. The pandemic rages among us. All of humanity is under threat. We all await treatments and vaccines. The election looms. We await the outcome of the election. Hopefully all who can vote will vote. First John tells us that what we will become is yet to be revealed. The Kingdom of God is unfolding. John called us God's beloved children. We know, through John's words, who we are. How we behave is rooted, deeply, in our identity. We all know that we are sinners too. Our roots in God's love are deeper than our roots in sin. Can we follow God more fully? Can we incorporate being God's beloved into our actions? As time reveals what will happen in our lives, our faith can reveal God's presence.

I've blest many rosaries and medals, homes and automobiles and many people. Let's not forget all those pets. In doing many baptisms over the years, I've blest gallons of water. What is a

blessing? Is it the rosary that shares God's holiness or is it the praying of the rosary that leads us into God? Blessing makes us aware of God's presence. In God's presence we find holiness. I maintain the car, rosary or home aren't made holy by the blessing any more than the rest of God's creation. They are the means by which we come in contact with God. To think of God or to be reminded of God is the event of blessing.

The beatitudes invoke God's blessing. We think the signs of God's blessing to us as being well fed and sated. We feel that being happy and safe to be signs of being blest as well. However, the blessing is most real when we need it. When we grieve, feel fear or when we sin are actually the times when Jesus can be closest to us. God's blessing is now amid pandemic, politics and prejudice. Jesus beatitudes are powerful reminders that Jesus is always near especially in times of trouble. Even when we feel the farthest away from him, Jesus is close. We live by faith, not how we feel. God created each of us. God saw that we are good, even though we can be very bad. God loves, saves and forgives us out of a love and presence we cannot ever lose.

Seeking the saints is different than seeking what is holy. The saints we will find only when we die. Instead of clinging to them, we can always seek what is holy. Holiness is knowing the presence of God. We can know God in all God's creation. All people, places, events and things can remind us as they reflect God to us. Each of us can know God deep within. Saints may be in heaven, but holiness can be now.

Let us remember that we give witness to God's presence. We can be channels of God's holiness.

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