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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
All Saints' Day (transferred)
November 3, 2019

All Saints, Year C
Daniel 7:1-3,15-18
Psalm 149
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

Living with the Saints

A few years ago, a parish with which I am acquainted had a sermon series on the saints. The preachers were the clergy of that parish as well as a few guest preachers. There was a fair diversity of saints that were chosen by the various preachers. Some chose figures from the far past, like the patristic Augustine of Hippo, or more recently, the nineteenth-century Thérèse of Lisieux. There were a few twentieth-century saints included whom we remember, as well as a mention of a particularly saintly grandmother.

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, one of the most important days in the Church calendar. It is one of seven “Principal Feasts” of the Church. But why? Some of the other principal feasts have fairly obvious justifications. Christmas and Easter are about the birth and resurrection of Christ. Epiphany is about the manifestation of God’s glory in Christ to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. Pentecost is about the sending of the Holy Spirit and thus God’s presence among us always. But why “all saints”? Why, and who cares? Here is why: the feast of All Saints implies a certain attitude toward death, and therefore toward life. To celebrate the feast of All Saints is to say that you are going to live a certain kind of life: one without fear.

Many parish buildings have alongside them graveyards of one kind or another. St. George’s doesn’t, though we do have a Memorial Garden. But many parishes are surrounded by tombstones. (I have a colleague who lives in a rectory that is right in the middle of their cemetery. This location has various advantages in discouraging door-to-door solicitors, though it also discourages delivery persons, especially after dark.) Some parishes also have relics of saints, of one kind or another, lodged in or around their altars. We, today, have read the names of those who have died, and remembered them, and prayed for them. Why is this, all this talk about death? Is it just because we’re morbid? Do we have some kind of weird fascination with death?

I don’t think so. To have a living, vibrant parish surrounded by those who have come before and gone on to their reward (from glory to glory) is to see the way that, in Christ, the living and the dead are one. We are unified in Christ. We see that in the Sanctus that we sing during the Eucharist: “therefore with angels and archangels *and all the company of heaven*” we sing our praises to God. The “company of heaven” is the saints with the angels, and we are singing in harmony with them, in different places, but singing the same song of praise to God. Singing with God in plain sight is not currently our privilege, but by God’s grace it will be. So, to have ourselves surrounded by the dead (who have come before), as we celebrate and live our lives today, and while also looking forward to the great tomorrow, when we are all together again, brings together all times (past, present, future) and all places (wherever the saints have been: Augustine and St. George, Thérèse of Lisieux and your grandmother) into one, unified family. The living and the dead are one in Christ. Past, present, and future are all brought together in the single moment of worship.

The feast of All Saints means that (1) the saints are in heaven, praising God and cheering us on; (2) it means that we can look forward to joining them; (3) and, by extension, it means that we do not have to be afraid of death. The promise of Christianity is that we don't have to be afraid of death, and so we can live lives that embrace and celebrate life. If we aren't afraid of death, then we don't have to be afraid of anything. God is all in all, and he is the God of life. Christ came to bring life and bring it in abundance. Christ is victorious over death in his resurrection, and so death has no authority over us. And if death has no authority over us, no dominion, then it does not control us, and we don't have to be afraid of it, and therefore we can live a different kind of life. Therefore, you can live a different kind of life, a life without fear.

What this looks like—a life without fear of death—will depend on your own circumstances and situation. (There is a great diversity of saintly lives, just as there is a great diversity of saints.) But here are some ideas.

If you're not afraid, you can forgive people that you might not be inclined to forgive, because we are all in the one family of Christ. That doesn't mean everyone has to always be together; forgiveness can look different ways. But why let the destructive power of resentment or a desire for revenge eat away at our hearts? We don't have to hang on to bitterness. We have been given the greatest gift—life forever—and everything else pales in comparison, even our grudges.

Likewise, we could try to love people that we might not be inclined to love. We might as well even try to love our enemies, because we don't have to be afraid of them. Christ has conquered death.

The saints also show us that a life without fear can mean a life of courage. We can be courageous in advocating for justice, in helping the poor, in standing up for what is right. We can live forever with God. To do the right thing with courage now is to prepare ourselves for that life in the world to come.

Finally, a life without fear means that we can make sacrifices of a fraction of the things of this world that are temporarily in our possession. In this season of stewardship, I am reminded of the Biblical injunction of tithing a tenth of one's income to Christ through his Church as one kind of sacrifice. Tithing (like any other sacrifice) isn't punitive; it isn't punishment. Tithing shows that we aren't afraid: we know that God has taken care of us, has blessed us, to this point, and that he will continue to bless us, both in the here and now, and into eternity—because death means nothing, because Christ conquered it, and so we don't have to be afraid. This is one of the things that living a different kind of life looks like. St. Francis gave away everything, because he wasn't afraid. God only asks for ten percent.

This is one of the things the feast of All Saints means: that we don't have to be afraid of death, and so we don't have to be afraid of anything, because God blesses and embraces and saves all those who want to be with him—and all those people are saints, so we celebrate All Saints.

You can see this implication of All Saints in some of the residual Christian practices that surround it, even if those aren't recognized. On Halloween, literally the "Eve of All Saints," we can act silly and mock death. We can laugh at death, because the forces of sin and death can try to scare us, but we are safe, because death is dead, and Jesus Christ is alive, surrounded by his saints, and so we don't have to be afraid.

The feast of All Saints is about how we live. Forgive. Love. Be courageous. Make your sacrifices.

Death is dead. Jesus Christ is alive.