

All Saints' Day  
November 1, 2020  
Psalm 34:1-10, 22  
Revelation 7:9-17  
1 John 3:1-3  
Matthew 5:1-12

It's All Saints' Day, AND this year it's on a Sunday! It's the day when we honor the faithful Christian men and women who went before us, and who are now resting in peace with God. Why have a day for all saints? Well, many saints have the days of their martyrdom dedicated to them, but there were so many martyrs during the early persecution of Christians in Rome, that there were not enough days in the year—and many saints died in groups on the same day, so it was decided to dedicate a day to ALL saints. That way, all saints, known and unknown, could be venerated. In medieval England the festival was known as All Hallows, which is where we get the word “Halloween”—all Hallows Eve. Something interesting about All Saints' Day is that the gospel reading for this day is always Jesus' “Sermon on the Mount” from Matthew's gospel. No other day in the Church year has the same gospel reading every year (not even Easter and Christmas), and I'd like to look at Matthew's gospel text to see why that might be.

The words of this passage are so familiar to us, even to people who are not churchgoers, that they might just flow past your ear without much notice. They're sort of part of our foundation. For instance in Monty Python's “Life of Brian,” when the character is listening to Jesus' sermon from a distance, and can't quite hear, and says, “cheesemakers? Did he say blessed are the cheesemakers?” we know that Jesus said “peacemakers” and we can laugh at the joke. But there is seriousness there, too, because for Jesus to say “blessed are the peacemakers” was an astonishing thing then. People expected peace to come hard-won, at the end of a sword; warriors were honored in this culture, not peacemakers. And the expected Jewish Messiah was supposed to be a commander of troops, and the person who would defeat the enemies of the Jewish people in battle, to bring about the promised Kingdom of God. But no, Jesus is not a warrior. He is a king, yes, but he is a poor man preaching, not revolt, but peace to a captive people. In fact, every kind of person whom Jesus points out as “blessed” in his sermon is a sort of underdog. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who want righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, and the reviled. How can this be the good news? How can this be the words of God's chosen? You can imagine how unexpected this interpretation of the law might have been to Jesus' listeners. Even John the Baptist, sitting in prison, sends word to Jesus after this sermon to ask if he is, actually the Messiah, or should John and his followers keep looking for someone else. This message of peace and forgiveness was not what they expected; they didn't want peace, they wanted victory. But this is what Jesus says the Kingdom of God looks like. The Kingdom of God which is already here, and not yet come, both at the same time. And these nine blessings are the path the saints have walked—trying to live and die following Jesus. Not perfect, but struggling to live as Jesus lived.

Not all saints are famous, of course. Saints are real people who struggle to walk this path, just as you and I do. Like one of the nurses I know in the COVID unit, that I'll call Jessica. Jessica has worked with our COVID-positive patients for months now, donning the huge, waterproof gown, gloves, and the PAPR filter hood, with its portable ventilation system, every time she goes in to see her patient. She has ministered to people in their misery, isolation and loneliness, often being the only person that patient sees in person for days at a time. Jessica gives them their medication, yes, but she also sits with them, holds their hands, and spends time praying with them, and encouraging them. Almost no one wants to be in the room with a COVID patient—but she does. This faithfulness has taken a toll, too. Even though she has used every precaution, Jessica got COVID. She was sick for three weeks, and her husband, children, and mother contracted the virus, too. They all survived, thanks be to God, but Jessica still does not have her sense of taste or smell, even after weeks of recovery. And she is back at work in the COVID unit. “It’s even more important to me now, than it was before I got sick,” she said. “Before, I *saw* what it was like, but now I *know* what it’s like. Anything I can do to relieve their suffering, I’m going to do.” Saints are not perfect, but they do work to be merciful, to want righteousness, to make peace. That is why this passage is read every All Saints’ Day. It shows us the path the saints have walked.

And Jesus is not asking us to do anything that he isn’t doing. He showed us about being merciful, being pure in heart, being persecuted and reviled. He is the sermon made flesh. He is showing us what it means to walk his path. And remember—we are not alone on the path. Jesus is always walking it with us.

Amen

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