

Year C
Proper 26
All Saints' Sunday
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 119:137-144
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Luke 19:1-10

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

We're celebrating All Saints' Day today, which many of you know will actually be on November 1st. It used to be called All Hallows' Day, or Hallowmass, which is where we get the name for Halloween. On the Church calendar, Halloween is All Hallows' Eve, "Hallows," being All Saints. You've probably guessed that All Saints' Day is a day on which we honor all the saints, both known and unknown, whom we believe are in heaven with God. It is especially a time when we remember those who have died in the past year, and when we remember those whom we love who have passed away.

We do this not just as a memorial, but out of a belief that there is a spiritual connection between the saints who have died, and those of us who are still on earth. Those who have died are with God, and God is with us—always. The Communion of Saints, that we mention when we say the Apostle's Creed, is defined in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer as "the unity of Christians of all ages, countries, and races in Christ, and the perfection of that unity in heaven." So it is all Christians, past present and future, who believe in Christ, and have committed themselves to following Jesus. In a mysterious way, it stretches beyond space and time.

Which is one reason why we sang "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God" just now. The theology of the hymn is very sound; it says there are saints who died hundreds of year ago, and there are saints walking the streets right now. And WE are saints, if we follow Jesus. I also like that hymn because when my daughter was little she would sing it "one was killed by a fierce wild priest."

But the idea of a saint being someone particular, and the idea of honoring those saints on a special day took a while to catch on. At first, as we see in Paul's letters to the churches, the members of the various churches were referred to as saints. By sharing life in Christ, he made it possible for them to be saints. Then, later, the term began to be applied more to "elite" Christians who had distinguished themselves in their life and faith in some way. The early Christian martyrs were especially singled out for this honor.

Then, as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, saints were held up as models to inspire the great numbers of people who were only Christians because it was required of them. In the year 607 the Emperor Phocas turned the Roman Pantheon (which means "all gods") over to the pope, as a tribute to the martyrs who had been killed during the Roman persecution of Christians during the

previous 300 years. The pope promptly removed all of the statues of pagan gods from the building, and consecrated it to all *saints*. The first time we see November 1st designated as a celebration of All Saints was in the 8th Century under Pope Gregory III; he dedicated one of the chapels in St. Peter's in Rome in honor of all the saints. A hundred years later, the celebration of All Saints' Day was a part of the Church calendar.

This led to the Roman Catholic church's very complicated requirements for someone being named a saint, and by the Middle Ages, people were encouraged to see saints as intercessors and advocates to whom, or through whom, one could pray. They were no longer simply inspirational witnesses for the Christian faith. Also, more and more saints' days were added to the Church calendar during this time, and churches and institutions began being named for saints. Pilgrimages to shrines of saints also became popular during the Middle Ages, and relics (that is, bits and pieces of) saints were kept in these shrines, and were often believed to have miraculous healing abilities.

In the Episcopal Church we also observe saints' days, but we see the saints as "the great cloud of witnesses," who have lived inspiring, remarkable Christian lives, rather than people to pray to. We also don't require saints to have produced miracles; a person becomes a saint in our tradition once their inclusion is recommended by two General Conventions of the Episcopal Church. So our saints include St. Paul *and* Dr. Martin Luther King; St. John *and* Oscar Romero; St. Augustine *and* Harriet Tubman. If you want to see the most up-to-date calendar of saints, do an internet search of Lesser Feasts and Fasts. It's also available in book form, with little biographies about each saint.

And so as we continue our celebration of All Saints' Day, remember the saints who inspire you. Who do you love, or admire, who motivates you to be a better Christian? Give thanks for those saints especially today.
Amen.

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