

Sermon for the Feast of All Saints

'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.'

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On this, the Feast of All Saints, we commemorate the souls of the blessed dead. All those born of water and the Word, made sons of the Almighty, set apart for His work.

The observance of this day was originally instituted in the ninth century to recall those saints and martyrs of old, now long buried in forgotten places, who endured for the sake of Christ, yet have not had the honor of being emblazoned on the art and iconography and, most noticeably, the calendar, of the Church. Though established with the greatest veneration for the nameless baptized, it has long been seen as a sort of consolation prize for those who suffered innumerable things for their confession, yet were not so charismatic as to make it to the hagiographical 'big-time,' such as The Apostles, or St. Stephen, or St. Lucy, or St. George.

Over time, this day came to include not only those martyrs lost to the sands of time, but to the faithful departed of every Christian family and home; to our aged grandparents and great grandparents, our godly friends and pious teachers; the pastor who first catechized us or gave us our first Communion. In this sense, it has become a very sentimental holiday, something of a cross between a pagan 'day of the dead' and a modern 'celebration of life,' all baptized into Christian observance with the ringing of a bell.

But it makes sense that all of our beloved relatives and friends who have been commended into the earth be remembered on this Feast with all the other confessors of Christ. They too bore the sign of the cross all the days of their life. They too carried the burden of the Word on their tongue in their conversation and supplication and prayer. They too submitted to the sufferings of the flesh which come from both event and age. They too faced death with Christian resolve. Of course, they should be counted among the saints numbered on this day. And for

one more reason: they, too, will likely be forgotten.

Find an old church. Walk through its cemetery. Count its gravestones. Stroke the engraved names on stone and marble, or embossed on bronze. Then ask the current pastor, or groundskeeper, or passing member who this gentleman or that son or this mother was. You will likely get a very short answer, or, more likely, no answer at all, except the frail assurance that surely someone out there still remembers, perhaps someone who shares the interred's last name.

This is indeed a day for those who suffered much, even if only in every common way; and those who knew no glory or reward in this life for their labors.

Today, we read perhaps one of the most popular passages in entire Bible, known generally as 'The Beatitudes.' Often we argue about how to rightly understand these statements, *blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemaker*; whether these are commands of how we should act, or descriptions of how we will, or perhaps something else altogether.

What strikes me is something a little more muted, even pedantic. Have you ever noticed that each beatitude is divided into two parts. It mentions a status: *blessed are those who mourn*, and then a result, *for they shall be comforted*. *Blessed are the meek*, then the result, *for they shall inherit the earth*. *Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom*, *those who hunger, for they shall be sated*.

Notice that in each of these pairs, the mourning, the meekness, the poverty, the hunger, these are all in the present tense. These are what we see and feel and touch and know now. These are our reality. The result is always in the future, '*they shall inherit, they shall be comforted, they shall be sated*.' It is never quite here, it is never yet being enjoyed.

Pain and anguish and ordeal, this is the present fact of the Christian. This comfort, this inheritance, this satisfaction, these are but a far of promise, of *a thing invisible, of a thing not yet seen*.

What a fine thing it seems, to be a saint, to suffer many things, then be handed over to death, and then forgotten.

Even St. John the Divine does not seem to recall these unnotable wretches shrouded in oblivion. *Who are these, clothed in white, and from where have they*

come?

A fine thing, to be a saint, to suffer many things, then be handed over to death, and then forgotten.

And yet, does it not ring familiar?

Who, then, mourns, even *over Jerusalem, who would have gathered her under his wing, and you would not?* Who, then, is *meek like a lamb to the slaughter, who opens not his mouth?* Who, then, is poor, but *him who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be countenanced, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave?*

Who, then, counts Himself among All Saints?

After St. John asked his question, the elder responds, *'These are the one's coming out of the great tribulation.'*

Indeed, these are the forgotten saints, remembered only by their Lord, who brings them up from the altar, and raises them forth from the grave, *who recalls His promises,* and speaks gently with the nameless sinner, the harlot, the tax-collector.

For He first suffered all things, and was *persecuted for righteousness sake,* for no longer will he look to the future for things not yet come, but rather He is the coming of the not yet. He is the kingdom, and the result of His incarnation is not in the future, but very much in the present: *for his is the kingdom of heaven. Behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

For by the Lord's coming, by His work and bloody sweat, His blood and sacrifice, His harrowing of Hell, His conquest of the grave, and His triumphal entry into the heavenly places, He brings eternity into the present, and the presence of God to every saint, none of which to Him are forgotten, nor are they nameless, for it is written that He shall *give to them a white stone, and upon it a new name that no one shall know, except him who receives it.*

Blessed, therefore, are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice, and be glad, for, truly, great is your reward in heaven.

For He who has given birth to us in baptism, has sustained us by His flesh and blood, and endured with us in every trial, He counts us as brothers, before the throne of *His Father, and our Father*.

'See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Revelation 7:2-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12.