

## Sermon 110816

### For All the Saints

Today, we celebrate All Saints Day, and began the service with the hymn *For All the Saints*. I think a reasonable question to ask this morning would be “For all what saints?” Most of us have a basic problem with the concept of sainthood. We generally think of a saint as someone who is morally perfect and has renounced all human pleasures and desires. If you ask the average American to name a saint you would probably get names like St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Francis, or maybe some more contemporary names like Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul II and don’t let us forget St. Philip. It is hard for any of us to even think of referring to ourselves as saints since we are painfully aware that we are far from being morally perfect. To get a better handle on who we are celebrating today, we need to take a step back.

The word *saint* comes from the Latin *sanctus* meaning holy. During the age of Christian persecution, the early church gave martyred saints their own feast days. Early Christian communities gathered to remember the life, courage, and mortal confession of those martyrs who went to their death in the name of Jesus with confidence in the resurrection. Later, the practice was extended to confessors who were celebrated for their witness to faith, and later to those who led lives of holiness and virtue. A sanctoral calendar with individual feast days for each canonized saint was established. If these saints have their own feast days, why then do we need All Saints Day? Good question. Well, St. Paul taught that all believers, all Christians are saints. Even Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner and Pope Benedict XVI note that we rightly celebrate All Saints recognizing both the canonized and the unknown saints at the same time, those who lived quietly in the land, the

poor and the little ones who were great only in God's eyes, those who go unacclaimed in any of the rolls of honor belonging to the Church or to world history.

On this All Saints' Day, we remember those loved ones who have gone before us or more accurately the Christian departed. In a moment we will toll the church bell as we remember those whom we love but are no longer with us. This day of remembering the departed may cause many of us to think a little about our own departure or "going on before." From the hymn, *For All the Saints: The golden evening brightens in the west; Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest; Sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest. Alleluia.*

The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about what happens immediately after death, and the concept of going to heaven is not an easy one. One of the questions on my ordination examination dealt with a hypothetical situation where you were to imagine that you were meeting with the Christian widow of a non-believer to prepare his funeral. There is a service in our *Book of Occasional Services* titled "Burial of One Who Does Not Profess the Christian Faith." This service provides readings and prayers for the bereaved, but still doesn't answer the question "Where is he now?" During the meeting, the woman asked, "Where is my husband now?" This was not the time for some of the well-worn euphemisms such as "he is in a better place" or "he is at peace now" or "he is no longer suffering." In all honesty, I couldn't say that any of these things are true for her husband, and in her heart of hearts, this committed Christian wife probably knew this. The only appropriate and honest pastoral response to the question is a straightforward "I don't know. Only God knows" I would tell this woman that she is perfectly justified in grieving for her departed husband and remembering the love that they had for each other.

What about those whom we remember today, the departed Christians, the saints? Where are they now? For Christians we can make a more hopeful and positive statement. The well-worn euphemisms “He is in a better place, at peace, and no longer suffering” become true. The Bible is full of promises. John 5:24: *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.* John 11:27-28: *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.* John 5:13: *I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.* And many more. We may not know the exact details of this eternal life, but we can know that for Christians it is good.

Let’s begin with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ because this provides for us the foundation and substance for the Christian hope of eternal life. The Resurrection is seen as the foundation of salvation with the Cross as sacrifice, the basis for our forgiveness, and the ultimate demonstration of God’s love for humanity. The Resurrection demonstrates God’s power over death and His ability to bring light out of darkness. St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:23 that Christ is raised as the first-fruits; then at his coming, those who belong to Christ will be raised as he has been raised. Jesus’ body after the Resurrection was different from his mortal body. He was given a body that transcended space and time and is imperishable. We see this in his Resurrection appearances where he walks through locked doors and is unrecognizable to his disciples yet is able to be touched and can eat meals with them. The ultimate destiny of Christians is bodily resurrection, but this resurrection is still in the future for everyone except Jesus.

When speaking of the afterlife, most of us use the word “heaven” in describing our ultimate goal. Bishop Tom Wright says that this is severely misleading and doesn’t begin to do justice to the Christian hope. Going to heaven when you die is not held out as the main goal in the New Testament. The main goal is to be raised into the transformed, glorious likeness of Jesus Christ. Philippians 3:20-21: *<sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.* If we want to talk about going to heaven when we die, we need to be clear that this is the first stage of a two-stage process. From the Book of Daniel: *‘At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.* This idea of sleeping in Christ is found throughout the New Testament, but it is likely that the awakening in this passage is symbolic language describing that last great day when we will be transformed: From 1 Thessalonians: *<sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. <sup>15</sup> According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud*

*command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

But back to the question, “Where is he now?” or where are they now, those beloved saints who have gone on before us? They are in the first stage of this two-stage process, a state of restful happiness. Even though the word “sleep” is used in the New Testament, we shouldn’t interpret this as a state of being unconscious. The body is asleep in the sense of being dead, but the soul, the real person, lives on. In the Revelation to John we hear the souls of the martyrs calling out to God for justice. On the Cross, Jesus tells the criminal who is being crucified alongside him, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” Paradise in traditional Jewish writing is not a final resting place, but a blissful garden, the parkland of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day. At funerals we often read the passage from John’s Gospel where Jesus promises, “In my Father’s house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you.” The Greek word for room used here is *monai* which refers not to a final stop on a trip, but to a temporary halt on a journey that will ultimately take you somewhere else. What we call heaven or life after death is not the final destination for us or for our loved ones. It is a state in which the dead are in the Kingdom of God and are held firmly within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ while they await their transformation.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is near. On one hand the fullness of the Kingdom is in the future, but on the other hand the power of God’s Kingdom is already present and active through Jesus in his preaching, miracles, death resurrection, and ascension. In our Gospel

reading today we see teaching about this Kingdom in the Beatitudes. This is the greatest statement of ethics that the world has ever known. This teaching of Jesus turns the world upside down as he fulfills the Law but doesn't abolish it. He is not introducing a new list of do's and don'ts, but a new attitude of the heart, one that honors God and neighbor. The first step in entering God's Kingdom is of course accepting Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. Next we try to live lives that imitate him and as we see in the Beatitudes at the heart of this life is humility.

We are called to model the life of Christ and to be agents of God's Kingdom, but it's not easy. This is how Bishop Wright sums it up: "Made for spirituality, we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamor for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment. But the new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind, in the tomb of Jesus Christ, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. It is time, in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day that is dawning. That, quite simply, is what it means to be Christian: to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God's new world, which he has thrown open before us." Amen.