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Homily

Solemnity of All Saints 2021

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“Funerals are for the living, not for the dead,” a very dear priest friend once said to me. In my early twenties then, I found his pithy phrase crude and irreverent—even offensive. But I have come to appreciate these words.

We need to remember our dead for our peace. The peace of those who have died is already eternal. In our second reading today, the First Letter of John leaves us this assurance that those who have died will see God’s face. “What we are to be in future has not yet been revealed; all we know is that when it is revealed, we shall be like God because we shall see God as he really is.”

The Solemnity of All Saints’ Day, which we commemorate today, is usually set for 1 November in the Catholic Church calendar—this past Monday. Although it is transferred for a good reason to the following Sunday, some of its symbolism is lost when it is not celebrated immediately before All Souls’ Day, the feast we celebrate on 2 November. In both, we remember our dead. On All Saints; we celebrate those who have died, and we glory in their resurrection—they are the saints of our time and times past who may not appear in the Church’s daily calendar of saints but who nevertheless behold the face of God, now. And on All Souls’ Day, we remember all who have died, whom we believe and firmly hope will behold the face of God someday.

Today, we rejoice because we are “the children of God”, as the apostle John assures his community. And, we know that all who were created by God, baptized in Christ and died in Christ, share in the resurrection Christ promised them, forever. They live.

But, as John goes on to say, that promise should be the hope upon which we build our lives. “Surely, everyone who entertains this hope”—the promise of salvation in Christ and eternal life— “must purify himself.”

Our memories of those we have loved, who have now died, serve to reunite us with that love that brought us so much joy and peace and for which we long. Those moments of memory and longing, for what we had with our dearly departed, bring us momentarily to that place of resurrection, we are all promised, and unite us with our beloved dead. But, the memory of those who have died is often also a place of reckoning for us. Think of the times and the rituals when we most honour our dead, and the crisis of these often provoke, and the opportunities they bring.

We leave funerals, wakes and memorial services, not only mourning the person we loved or knew who died; but asking ourselves searing questions: How have I lived my life? What have I done? What am I doing? What will I do before I die? Put plainly: Whom am I? What is my legacy?

The answers to these questions will help us perhaps understand how we are to have that purity of Christ that John speaks of.

So as not to descend into unhelpful images of what we conceive to be the purity of Jesus, let us consider St. Paul’s teachings to the early Christian community. Paul would often address the people in Corinth, Rome or Galatia as saints. Even though he knew full-well of their sinfulness, he recognized

the great call each one had to “holiness.” And he should know, given his own sordid past conversion on the road to Damascus.

In much the same way as Paul wrote letters to his community. And we can, certainly, draw profit for our own lives and learn from all this great apostle writes. But, today, I invite you to consider the Gospel we’ve just heard as Jesus’ letter to us— a manifesto for our own road to sainthood.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus gives us a way of living that is meant to support us in our journey of faith, our journey of holiness. Though, we can read each line and take comfort that many of those who have died, whom we have known, fit the description of those considered blessed and, therefore, can be convinced that they are rejoicing in the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew tells us. We can also use these as an opportunity for deeper reflection on our own lives and whether we are presently leading our lives in ways that are pleasing to God and will fit us for heaven.

Our gospel today should be a challenge for us who live still. Jesus, in his sermon on the mount, tells us who is blessed. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the clean of heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness. These are the ones who the gospel tells us should “Rejoice and be glad, for their reward will be great in heaven.”

Allow me to offer my own contemporary reading of some of these:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, the humble who know that all is a gift from God. Blessed are those who can see the brokenness of the world and mourn for it because they can see it and love it as God does. Blessed are those who can recognize injustice in the world and are moved by it, and who want to make the world a better place for their brothers and sisters.

These beatitudes speak to a set of values or attitudes that we are to encourage in our lives if we become more like Christ, become saints like the saints we celebrate today. Think of them not so much as an overwhelming goal to reach but as an invitation to what we are called to live, in our priorities and our choices.

We are not only rejoicing and hoping in the resurrection and in the hope of salvation for all who have already died; we are placing firm hope in the salvation also promised to us. And so indeed, our rituals and memories in honour of those who have died are not as much for our beloved who have departed this earth and behold the face of God. They are a gift from them to us who live and still need to learn to truly live for God—a wake-up call from the heavens.

The number of those in heaven is untold, as is the number of those on earth who long to see God’s face. And, at the end of all our days, when at last our hope for God is filled, and we are all beholding God and those we love face to face, the incalculable losses of life this year, the disappointments of all we have done this year and in all years, pandemics past, present and future will pale in comparison to what awaits us forever.