



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, November 3, 2013
The Solemnity of All Saints

Solemn Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon John Andrew, *Rector Emeritus*
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SURPRISED TO BE INVITED

In a book I have been reading on Washington D.C. called “This Town” I hear there is fever in some quarters and chill in others. It’s a question of who does and who does not get invited to one politically strategic occasion or another. There is triumph and there is chagrin. It seems that some set inordinate importance on that invitation: if they get one, triumph; if not, apoplexy.

And there are some for whom the invitation has come as a great surprise.

It’s about that sort of soul that I wish to talk briefly today as we celebrate the solemnity of the Feast of All Saints. Saintliness, says my old friend and seminarian Fr. Donald Allchin in a book on holiness, “is about a festival of joy, a dinner party to which all the most unlikely people are invited. For holiness is about God giving his life and love for men, and people giving their life and love to one another in a movement of joy which overflows in thankfulness to God the Giver. The Gospels are full of stories about meals taken together, about great ceremonial feasts, about family celebrations with music and dancing, when someone who has been missing suddenly turns up, about breakfast by the lakeside in the summer dawn, with fish and bread cooking on the coals. The holiness of God is always what we least expected. It works itself out in flesh and blood ...” (A. M. Allchin, “Man’s Concern with Holiness,” p. 37)

Flesh and blood. Ordinary folks. I was in a traffic jam once on a Saturday and it was sermon day. The taxi driver was cursing the out-of-towners with their cars and the utter inability of most of them to do a good job of getting their cars to behave. Why I said what I said, I’m not at all sure, but I heard myself saying, “Well, God must love them; he seems to have made so many of them.” Poor drivers; New York it seems is teeming with them. I have a suspicion that New York is teeming with people through whom God is mightily at work doing extraordinary things, making saints out of the very ordinary flesh and blood which crowd our sidewalks and jam our intersections. The Bible says that God has made us after his likeness, in his image. You remember that? It’s in Genesis. So he has a lot of material to work with. Why people assume saints to be rare, I’m not sure. I believe the amount to be a “host which no man can number.” It is not a club to which people have to present their credentials: the right parents, the right school, the right accent, the right brains, the right occupation and the right friends. Nobody can possibly hope to qualify, in the sense that if they take care of all the necessary details and get the right letters of recommendation they will be in; the elect, the celestially elite. Saintliness isn’t something special which you apply for. Suspect the man or woman who joins the craze for writing those self-help books and publishes one called, “Humility in Four Months and How I Achieved It.” Suspect the writer of a book on attaining holiness.

No, the hope is for something else entirely. The hope is to be friends with Christ, to grow “in the knowledge and love of God” as our Prayer Book says, to want him, to want to want him. It is a yearning for his nearness, the “infinite desire,” we call it, for the companionship of Christ.

And others, oh! those others! For whom through disappointments uncounted and sickness enough to devastate and frustrations like the Himalayas to climb, have somehow set their face like a flint for love of God and persevered to the end, and have failed. Failed to conquer the things they hated in themselves, these have somehow been rescued and rounded up for saintliness and saved through Christ forever. They are the surprising ones, and they are the surprised ones. This is the miracle of sanctity. It is Christ who, in his parable about a king and his wedding party to which people rudely refused to come, puts these words in to the king’s mouth: “Go out to the main roads and invite everyone you can find to the wedding.” And then he says that “...the servants went out into the streets, and collected all they could find, good and bad alike. So the hall was packed with guests. (Matt. 22:9-10)

Good and bad alike; they packed that hall. I think Christ is telling us something here, when we wonder who the saints can be: not merely the spiritually efficient, and there are many of them, thank God. Not merely the ardent lovers of Christ, and there are many of them, thank God. Forgiven sinners, the hopelessly ineffectual as far as we may see—surprised at their summons to the close companionship of a friendly God who longs for their company. It never occurs to a saint that he or she is different from anybody else. It never occurs to him or to her to compare with anybody else, either in achievement or in attitude. That would be counting riches, and rich men, we are told by Christ, never can inherit the Kingdom of God; camels squeeze through the needle’s eye long before that. Forgiven sinners, for along with the invitation from God comes the pardon. He wipes away the tears from their eyes. And you may be sure, when you hear that God’s “mercies are new every morning” with his daily and eternal forgiveness of us, so is the mercy of his invitation eternally extended, as forgiven sinners attest in their surprised gratitude for the offer from that day to this. Ask them about it. They say something like this: they had mistaken the call of God for something else perhaps, had been nudged into an awareness of him by being confronted by Christ in somebody else. But then—the realization came, that the invitation to love was meant for them.

They will also tell you, and they themselves may have coined the phrase, knowing more about the state of things than some of us, that hell will freeze over before the basis of their relationship with God is founded upon any terms other than that of his hospitable invitation and forgiveness. Earthly perfection, never. Awareness of personal attainment and achievement, never. It is all his initiative. He invites and forgives in the same breath. “This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.” (Matt. 21:43)

Surprised to be invited. Devastated at the forgiveness which the invitation to friendship with him includes. Far from perfect, their lives are quietly offered back to him. Their faults are alarmingly obvious. Many obviously in New York persist in driving badly on Saturdays. Others have equally irritating quirks of nature seemingly untouched by the grace poured into them by Christ through his Spirit. It takes rooms full of sunlight for you easily to see the dust. But they will be the first to admit that they are hopelessly inefficient housekeepers, though for the love of Christ they will keep on trying to clean up their act and they are sorry if the dust offends you.