

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 6, 2022

All Saints' Sunday

Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

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“The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.”

A bishop who loved to play golf found himself wondering whether there were any golf courses in Heaven. He began to think about it so much that he started to fantasize about it, and it even began to appear in his prayers! One day, as he was praying and worrying what his handicap might be in heaven, he was startled when an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, “Bishop, God wants you to stop worrying. He wants you to know that there are many excellent golf courses in Heaven. The greens are always in first class condition, the weather is always perfect, and you always get to play with the very nicest people.” “Oh, thank you,” said the bishop warmly, “That really is marvellous news.” “Isn’t it just?” said the angel, “and we’ve got you down for a foursome next Saturday.”

From the catechism of the Book of Common Prayer:

Question: What is the communion of saints?

Answer: The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.

That’s quite something isn’t it? When we think of the saints, we are programmed from a very early age to think of them as separate from us, as different from us, that heaven is far away, and that the saints have somehow lived a life far more worthy than mine. The iconography we use in church – the images and the stained-glass windows - show the saints as other-worldly; always in prayer; with halos around their heads, and that strange beatific look on their faces that suggests that they found prayer oh-so-easy. No wonder we don’t associate ourselves with them – they are the Premier League of Christians, and our lives cannot possibly be connected with theirs...or can they?

Listen again to the definition of the Communion of Saints from our church’s catechism: **The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt...**

Yes, we are all called to be saints and we are bound up with one another – those whom we love and those whom we have hurt; that’s pretty revolutionary. Perhaps Heaven is not going to be such a comfortable place after all if it is somewhere that we can take our petty differences, our squabbles, our resentments, our grudges, and our hurt pride. After all, in the Sermon on the Plain from our Gospel reading today, Jesus follows the four beatitudes with four woes. I remember a wise old priest once telling me what to do if parishioners fell out with one another, “Tell them to take a good long look at those people sitting around them in church, and remind them that they are going to be together for a very, very long time!”

The fact remains that we are bound up *together* – the living and the dead in this mystical communion which is called the Church or the Body of Christ – the Communion of Saints – which stretches beyond the grave, uniting earth and heaven in a wonderful and yet sometimes troubling embrace. The collect of the day puts it in an even more powerful way: “Almighty God, who hast **knit together** thine elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord.” What a beautiful image of the Creator forming a tapestry from human souls – each one different and complementary to the other – knitted together like a glorious Fair Isle sweater or Arran Jumper from the Highlands of Scotland with its intricate patterns, and providing warmth and protection from the elements.

Another way of looking at it is to imagine the double helix of human DNA – the more we discover about the human body and its genetic makeup, the more we discover the complexity of the human race, and how God has created us with this cyclical image deep in the very fabric of our existence. And into that existence, God emptied himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Listen to the beautiful words from today’s epistle reading: “*God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, **the fullness of him who fills all in all.***” The Communion of Saints is knit together not through the good deeds of those who lived holy lives, but through the abiding presence of Jesus Christ our Lord and God. To be a saint, therefore, is to discover the glory of God. And to discover the glory of God is to discover our humanity, made in his image.

We only have to read the lives of the saints to discover that they, too, were fallible, broken human beings – they were often depressed, dismayed, even angry. I love the story of St. Teresa of Avila who was travelling in a cart one day and the wheel got stuck in a rut, and she was tipped out into a ditch. Furious, she shook her fist and shouted at God, “If this is how you treat your friends, I pity your enemies!” Thérèse of Lisieux, John of the Cross, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Martin Luther King Jr, even St. Peter himself – they were not perfect – they stumbled and fell often, but the difference is that, like the marathon runners today in New York, they pulled themselves back up again and again and again – as St. Paul said to Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” (2 Timothy 4:7). Our devotion to the saints is not that they were perfect and separate from us, but precisely because they were all so human like us, and set us an example that can inspire us today; seeking the glory of God; seeking his presence. St. Irenaeus puts this in the most beautiful way: “*the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.*”

Just ponder on that for a moment: **“The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.”**

Irenaeus also said: “*Human beings shall therefore see God in order to live, being made immortal by that sight and even entering into God.*” (Against the heresies Book 4, chapter 20)

What a wonderful consequence of the incarnation! When Moses asked to see the face of God, God refused him and told him that if he were to do so, he would die. By contrast, we are invited to discover in the face of Jesus the image of the invisible God, and to have life in all its fullness. To be a Saint is to be holy. To be holy is to be like God. To be like God is, as Irenaeus explains, to be fully alive – fully human – ironically, fully ourselves and not trying to be someone else.

The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise. As we celebrate this mass in honor of the saints, we remember that we are bound up in their fellowship, knit together as the elect; we depend on them, and they need us, so that we can discover afresh the glory of God.

“the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.”