

Pentecost 22 / All Saints Day / November 1, 2020

Matthew 5:3

. “Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Happy All Hallows Day, or as it is now commonly known, All Saints Day. We observe All Saints Day each year on the first Sunday in November. All Saints Day is November 1st and so this year we are blessed to observe it on its day. People commonly think of saints as kind people who do good deeds; or as dead people who can no longer do anything bad, because they are in heaven. When someone begins a sentence by asking me to “be a saint,” I’m not sure whether they are going to ask me to do something good for them, or if they are going to tell me to drop dead.

Saints are good people who do kind things; and saints are the dead who are in heaven. But the reason they are good and do kind things, is because they have received the kindness of God’s love in forgiveness and been made good, by receiving Christ’s righteousness that covers over their sins. The saints go to heaven when they die, because they have been washed of sin in the blood of Jesus, the Lamb who was slain for our forgiveness. In Jesus, all believers are saints, made holy in forgiveness and heirs of the kingdom of heaven!

We don’t have to be dead to be saints, but we have to be alive in Christ. Saints are people who are alive in Christ through faith and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. ‘Saint’ is the Latin word for the Hebrew word ‘righteous’ and the Greek word, ‘holy.’ It’s a complicated word! Saints are people who have been made holy through the forgiveness of sins, received through faith in Jesus and baptism into His death and resurrection. Saints are human beings, who confess their sin and receive Jesus’ righteousness as a garment to cover their sinfulness.

Saints are people who once were dead in their transgressions, but who have been made alive to God for the sake of His grace in Christ Jesus. In Ephesians, Paul writes: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” All Saints Day reminds us that whether we live in our bodies or our bodies sleep in the grave, our spirits are alive to God in Christ.

The festival is called ‘All Saints’ but it is really all about Jesus! All Saints is a day to remember Jesus and that it is His blood and righteousness that makes us holy through the forgiveness of sin. All Saints is a day to remember that God has a plan of salvation for the world and that as believers, each of us, all who have gone before us and everyone who will come after us, has a part in that plan. All who believe in Jesus and have been baptized into Him, have a purpose in God’s great design and a place in the kingdom of heaven, described so beautifully in our lesson from Revelation, where God wipes tears from every eye.

The kingdom of heaven is God’s righteous reign, which Jesus has begun in our hearts through the gift of faith. We don’t have to drop dead to go to heaven. Heaven is already in our hearts! God reigns now in our hearts through Christ Jesus. God reigns in the earth now through the church, the body of believers. God proclaims salvation in Jesus’ name through the church on earth. Through the witness of believers such as you and me, God calls all people to Himself in repentance that He may incorporate them into His kingdom through faith in Jesus and baptism into His death and resurrection. All who believe and are baptized into the death of resurrection of Christ are made holy in forgiveness and promised a place in the kingdom of heaven at the return of Jesus.

The commemoration of deceased believers began to be practiced in the church in the third or fourth century, after the great persecutions had come to an end and Christianity was the accepted religion of the Roman world. Christians wanted to preserve the memory of believers who had suffered death in witness to their faith in Christ. The first believers commemorated were those who had died as martyrs for Christ. The word ‘martyr’ means ‘witness.’ Jesus said, “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.” These women and men had been faithful unto death and so they were held in high regard by their fellow believers.

The memory of believers who had suffered death in witness to their faith was commemorated annually on the day of their death. A saint’s day is the day of his or her death. The day of death was seen as the day in which the martyrs passed into eternal life. We are born into eternal life when we are given the second birth of faith, by the Spirit through water and the word. The day of baptism marks our rebirth as the children of God. The day of death marks the passing of the baptized more fully into God’s presence, to await the fullness of rebirth in the resurrection of Christ.

A saint's day is the day of their death to the world and birth into heaven. Some saints have a special day. All Saints is a day for all believers. On All Saints Day we remember that in Jesus, death has been defeated and will one day be swallowed up by life. We remember the goal of our faith is to dwell in the presence of God for the sake of Christ, the Lamb who was slain for our salvation.

Jesus' death and resurrection has changed the way believers see and experience death. Death has been transformed from a dead end, to the means through which we enter more fully into God's presence to await the fulness of eternal life, in our share of the resurrection of Christ. Nevertheless, it's only natural that we would approach the end of our days with some trepidation. The wages of sin is death. Death reveals our sinfulness, no matter how saintly our lives appeared to be. All Saints Day reminds us that Jesus is our Saviour and that the gift of God is eternal life through Him.

It is sad to say goodbye to fellow believers at the end of their earthly journey. We loved them. We grieve, because we miss them. We grieve, but we don't despair. We grieve in hope. We remember Paul's words in Thessalonians, "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep." All Saints Day leads us to Jesus and the real and living hope we have in Him.

The Sermon on the Mount is the most well known of Jesus' sermons. The beatitudes are the most loved section of His sermon. These are traditional verses for the commemoration of the faithful departed and the celebration of All Saints Day. In these verses Jesus speaks of the blessedness of believers, despite the hardships of life and the sufferings that come as a result of following Him in faith and faithfulness. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom heaven." Believers are blessed, not because they are poor, mourning, hungry, thirsty, merciful, peaceable or persecuted. The saints are blessed, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs through their relationship with Christ the King.

The blessedness of the kingdom of heaven is to know Jesus as Lord and to trust Him as Saviour. Because of Jesus, we are blessed in every circumstance of life and even in the presence of death. The blessedness of the kingdom of heaven is being in relationship with God. It is from this primary blessedness that all other blessings flow. Jesus doesn't say we will only be blessed when we die and go to heaven. We are blessed now, because He is our Saviour and in Him God has begun His righteous reign within us. We are blessed now, because we know Him as Saviour. We are blessed now, because in Him we are made holy in the forgiveness of sins. We are blessed because in Him, God has begun His righteous reign in our hearts, which will be fulfilled not in our physical death, but in our share of His resurrection to everlasting life.

Because we know God in a relationship of peace and love, we are blessed even if we are hungry, persecuted and poor. Because we know God in a relationship of peace and love, we are blessed even if we are living in abject misery. We are blessed even if we are living in the midst of a pandemic! Because we know God in a relationship of forgiveness, we are blessed even if we are grieving the deaths of loved ones. Because we know that Jesus is the resurrection and life, we are blessed even if we are facing our own death! All saints are comforted in the presence of death, by the knowledge that Christ has taken our sins and paid their debt on the cross. Because of Jesus we can say with St. Paul, "O death where is your sting? O grave where is your victory?" Christ has taken away the sting of death through His death. Christ has claimed the victory over the grave with His resurrection; the first fruits of all who believe.

Jesus makes all believers saints, in forgiveness. Jesus promises all who have been baptized into His death, a share in His victory over the grave. All Saints is not a day of the dead, it is a day of the living. As Jesus said to the Sadducees, the Lord is not God of the dead, but of the living for all are alive to Him. All Saints is a day to remember and celebrate the life we have in Christ in time and for eternity. Its a day to remember that whether we are alive in our bodies, or our bodies rest in the earth, we are alive to God for the sake of Christ. When the shadows lengthen and death draws near with Jesus we can say, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit." That's the blessedness of the kingdom of heaven, which is ours now through faith and will be ours fully and forever in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In mercy Jesus keep us to that day and bring us to that dear land of rest. Amen