

All Saints Sunday, 7 November 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Here we are on All Saints Sunday, one of the very few days of the Church year when our tradition calls for baptisms. My son Min was baptized on All Saints Sunday when he was less than one month old. It is a good day for baptisms, to welcome new members into the one communion and fellowship of the mystical body of Christ, following in the paths of the saints who have gone before to the joy God has prepared for us. Whether or not we have baptisms on this day, we always renew our own baptismal vows, reminding ourselves of the promises that are part of our lives as the baptized.

What wonderful and inspiring images are found in the lessons and hymns today. A company of holy and heroic people marching to glory, all connected, living and dead, in one bright band. Who would not want to be part of that?

I have frequently been confronted with the question: 'who are the saints?' 'Who are we talking about?' I respond that the saints are us and they are also the ones who inspire us.

The original Jewish and Christian terms from which our term 'saints' comes referred to all the people of God, all people of faith, all who committed their lives to God, all who were participating in the struggle to lead the lives God called them to, however much they might fail – all of us. We are the saints of God.

But being a saint, a follower of God, is not something to take for granted. Remember when Jesus chastised some complacent Israelites who were resting secure in their relationship with God because they were 'children of Abraham' – which is to say they were born saints.

Jesus told them that God could raise up children of Abraham from the very stones by the roadside. One may be born into the people of God, but one must still work at it. This is a calling. And sometimes it is hard work.

And so we are grateful for the capital 'S' Saints, the ones who inspire us, who help us to live up to our high calling, to be faithful and strong and good and just and loving. In my friend Father Ed's wonderful feast day collection I found these words, "When we use the word 'saint' in the context of All Saints Day we refer to those Christians who have lived such hallowed lives, yielding so fully to the Holy Spirit, showing such love for God and his human creatures, that their examples are treasured and emulated. These individuals ... are the champions of Christ and his church, and the heroes of the faithful."

"The champions of Christ and his Church and the heroes of the faithful." Those are the spectacular people we honor today and into whose company we are called to invite new saints.

We are honoring Saint Paul whose words have inspired the Church for almost two thousand years. We are honoring Richard Hooker, whose feast was this week and who brought dignity and reconciliation to a time of hideous strife and controversy in the English nation and Church.

We honor the Blessed Mother of our Lord and Saint James and Saint Francis and Saint Mary Magdalen and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa – and all those whose examples have helped to make our lives of faith more possible by their example.

We will invite baby Nicolas, born just weeks ago, and baby Estrella, born on Friday night, and John and Gaby's coming son, and Katie and Nick's coming baby, and Kathleen and Phil's coming twins to join us in our band of faithful people, striving to follow those saints in leading holy lives, lives to make glad the heart of God.

In today's Gospel lesson Saint Luke records some of Jesus' words on the subject. He reminds us who are the blessed and who are not. The blessed, the ones walking with God, he says, are those who are hungry, weeping, hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed. We are to find joy in these experiences, because we know that God will remedy all of them.

Then he proclaims woe to the rich, the full, the laughing, the popular. This seems worrying. We are more likely to be among the full, the laughing, the rich. And we do not want to be hungry, excluded, or reviled.

So what advice does Jesus give us to be among the blessed, the saints, the true citizens of his Kingdom: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you; turn the other cheek to those who harm you; give to all beggars; do not demand back what is stolen from you.

These are certainly hard words to live by. But when we look at the Saints we find them struggling to do just that. And we find it good news that even they often fell short.

It is also good news that none of us has to trod this difficult path alone, that we are indeed surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints, the blessed company of all faithful people. And it is even better news that God does not expect us to do this with only human resources, that Jesus promises that God will be with us to bless our path, to give us the strength and courage and wisdom and patience and love, all the things necessary to live this remarkable kind of life.

We are living through a time of intense division and recrimination, a time of anger and hostility, both in our nation and in the Anglican Communion. These are all very unchristian things, as Saint Paul regularly reminded his churches. He told them (and us) that party spirit is not the spirit of the Gospel, of Christ, that reconciliation is the spirit of the Gospel, as we heard today.

So how do we find the forgiveness, the acceptance, the generosity, the hospitality that Jesus commends to the saints? Particularly, how do we find the hope that will enable us to have all of these other things? The first reading speaks directly to this: Daniel has a dream and is troubled by his visions. He is afraid and confused. When he asks, he is told that the terrible things he sees will indeed happen, but that the holy ones, the saints, the ones who love God, will find themselves in the Kingdom (of Heaven) forever and ever. There is

hope, hope that God will be with us always, that we will find our way, stumbling, into the Kingdom, that all will be well.

If we accept the hope that God offers us in Jesus, then it makes sense for us to share this hope, this challenging but rewarding life, with the ones we love best. It makes sense to bring our children and our friends to baptism, to the doorway into the communion of saints, to place them on the path to ultimate joy. It makes sense to invite friends to church, as Keith and Bill have been challenging us to do.

When I think of Baptism, I often recall *All Hallows' Eve*, Charles Williams' last novel, in which the clandestine infant baptism of one of the characters plays an important part.

Although the character Betty cannot consciously remember the event, it has an important effect on her spirit, connecting her to God, to the right ordering of the universe, so that she is able to resist evil forces out to destroy her. Importantly, she overcomes them not with force, but with simple joy. The evil forces are adept in magic, the manipulation of spiritual forces for their own selfish ends, and some might see baptism in this tale functioning as an alternative, good kind of magic, but they would be wrong. Baptism, as all sacraments, does not represent us trying to control God or any spiritual realities for our own ends. Quite the opposite. Baptism is our submission to the divine, accepting spiritual help and sustenance, allowing ourselves to be linked to the Spirit which gives life and is life, accepting the invitation to be part of the joy at the heart of the universe. Betty's nurse accepted that invitation on her behalf when she was brand new like Estrella – and she was 'marked as Christ's own forever'.

So it is with all of us when we are baptized, brought into this great communion and fellowship. We are marked, and set out on a path which will enrich our lives, and enlisted in the company which will build the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

And so we remind ourselves of our baptismal covenant, our special, permanent, promised relationship with God in Christ. We strengthen our bond, as we bring others into it – and we rejoice to be part of this great band of witnesses, this Communion of Saints which is the Body of Christ in the world.

Now I will conclude with some beautiful words from Saint Paul that we heard earlier in the second lesson:

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”
Amen.