

All Saints Day

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All Saints Day—November 1st—became an important part of western medieval piety. It served two clear purposes. The first was to give a place for the many saints who were not of sufficient universal interest to warrant their own day, or even for those not officially canonized but already in heaven with Christ. The second reason was to deal with an already existing celebration strongly a part of Northern European, Germanic and Celtic culture that had to do with those who had died. It is this second reason that governed the choice of date at the end of October, early November. The awareness of this history can be helpful in understanding how All Saints Day developed.

The ancient, pre-Christian celebration had to do with the return of the herds from higher mountain grazing areas where they had been for the summer months, with some members of the family living there with them. Now, in anticipation of winter, the animals and the herders returned home. Not surprisingly, in a culture where families, generation after generation, lived in the same homes and gathered around the same hearths, this annual “homecoming” was seen to include the return of the people who had died and who now gathered around their former earthly hearths. Some were friendly, but others were not, and therefore all animals had to be kept indoors, and it was best not to venture outdoors after dark. These hostile returnees could be bribed with food and drink not to do harm to the house and its inhabitants.

It is easy to see from this background how two different traditions developed when the celebration was baptized by the Christian Church. The hostile spirits—the ghosts and goblins—would be transformed into neighborhood children dressed as those earlier fearful visitors, and the “trick or treat” would remain for them. On a more serious note, the remembrance of those family and friends who had died in the faith would have its needed time for remembrance. In the language of old English, we would have All Hallows Day and its vigil, All Hallows Eve or, more familiarly, Hallowe’en.

Our concern here is All Hallows Day, or All Saints Day, rather than the children’s holiday of the night before, though there is much that could be said about the difficulties that night has fallen into in our country today.

All Saints Day has to do with how we who are part of the Church in today’s world are to relate to those who have been part of our fellowship in the past but have been separated from us by death. It is easy to understand why, in the late medieval church, this day and this issue became involved in the concerns that were at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. For that reason, Luther’s choice of the Eve of All Saints to nail to the door the theses he wished to debate has a certain irony to it. But this historic occasion has also meant that many Protestant churches dropped All Saints from the calendar as though it were irredeemably tainted with medieval heresies, and substituted

"Reformation Day" that handily occurred at the same time. More recently, the wisdom of this has been questioned.

Let us look at the positive values of a renewed celebration of All Saints Day. It is clear that every church needs to have some occasion for remembering those who have died in the faith. John Calvin insisted that the regular Sunday worship of the church include a prayer for the communion of saints, to emphasize that we are part of a fellowship that goes across time, and that our lives have been blessed by the human agents that have brought us the Gospel. In many churches, such remembrance occurs at Easter. This has serious problems, however. Often enough Easter is reduced to the statement that there is life after death. This is good news, but would have been no surprise to the Pharisees or, in a different way, to many Greeks. The message of Easter is not that there is life after death, but that, in the resurrection of Jesus, the Kingdom has actually begun even though the old creation still continues. It is a message of victory over the forces of sin and death, a victory that remains hidden except to the eyes of faith, not the word of an eternal truth that has been hidden beyond death until Jesus's resurrection. When Easter is used to speak about life after death for us and for our loved ones, the heart of the Easter message remains unpreached. Separating the remembrance of those who have died from Easter would be helpful for Easter itself. Churches that do celebrate All Saints Day often use this occasion to remember specifically by name all the members of the congregation who have died during the last year and to recall those whose Christian lives have brought to us the meaning of God's grace. It is also helpful to couple All Saints Day with World Wide Communion Sunday, but a few weeks earlier in the church year, letting the geographic unity of the church across the globe be clear in early October, and the temporal unity of the church across the centuries be clear early in November.

Church members in our own day have serious questions about the relationship between the living and the dead. If this issue is never seriously, theologically addressed, it is no wonder that strange ideas are readily entertained. All Saints Day gives an occasion to deal with this issue quite directly, at least once every few years.

It is quite possible to combine All Saints Day and Reformation Sunday, inasmuch as some of the saints whom we revere and whose faithfulness has greatly impacted our lives are the great figures of the sixteenth century Reformation. Especially since the Second Vatican Council, the easy assumption that what we celebrated on Reformation Sunday is not being Catholic, is no longer workable.

With this as a background, let us look at the specific texts that the lectionary assigns for All Saints Day (this year a Friday, but they can readily be moved to the Sunday before or after.)

Four passages are assigned, including one from Psalms and three from the New Testament. They can be divided into two groups. The Psalm and the Gospel both point to the characteristics of sainthood. The Gospel lesson is the familiar passage from Matthew 5:1-12, the Beatitudes. Looked at in the context of All Saints Day, the individual beatitudes can be filled out with examples from the past or the present, showing how such saints might actually look

in practice. This is a different approach than looking at the beatitudes as first of all calling us to action. One of the roles that canonized saints have had in the life of the church is to bridge the gap between a somewhat abstract call to perfection and the actual life in the world that Christians live. The beatitudes are calls to peacemaking, to working for justice, to gentleness, purity, and mercy. Lives that fulfill these characteristics are not all alike, and they can open up our imaginations as to what these beatitudes might really look like in our own lives. Such a use of this passage on this day could not only help clarify the text but also show the authentic usefulness of named saints in the life of the church, which is clearly appropriate for All Saints Day.

The Psalm selection is Psalm 34:1-10. This passage points to a different characteristic of saints: the faithfulness that has complete confidence in God. If one wished to emphasize some of the Reformation Day aspects of this occasion, it would be very possible to point out how the Gospel and Psalm texts need each other. To try to live up to the Beatitudes as a Law, or as an entrance requirement for the Kingdom, as though such lives were within our power to live would be folly—a classic “salvation by works” issue. Confidence in God, trust that God is indeed our only security is the foundation of the holy life. We cannot be merciful or seek justice and peace if we are mainly concerned with our own security and trying to establish it ourselves. Only when we are clear that God is our only security can we risk the kind of life that the beatitudes call us to live. Faith in God’s promises to us, confidence that God’s grace is indeed sufficient, is the first step to sainthood. But the Matthew text also helps us be clear that faith in God is not a private feeling that has no life-transforming power. Vital faith leads to the strange kind of life that the world does not understand. It leads to a life in which our own security is not our first priority, for we are already assured that we are absolutely secure in God. Faith clearly comes before works, but there is a place for both. These two passages can help us see that.

The second pair of texts point in a more eschatological direction, and relate clearly to the life to come. The first is I John 3:1-3. God acknowledges us as God’s own children, though the world does not acknowledge us as its children. But what we shall be in the future is not yet revealed, and will not be until the risen Christ is fully revealed to us. There is a movement in this passage that is very helpful. There is a difference even now between those who are “of God” and those whom the world acknowledges. Yet this difference is not the final one. What we are now is not what we shall be. It is easy for Christians to overlook one of these transformations and assume the faithful are already what they shall be, or to assume that faith is a hidden quality and there is no real transformation until after death. This passage refutes both views. It also maintains a sense of mystery that does not claim to know all the answers. What we shall be like in the fullness of the kingdom is not yet revealed. We know we shall be transformed and be like Christ, but exactly what that means we do not yet know. A healthy sense of mystery and the ability to be content without all the answers is a needed quality of the Christian life.

The final passage is from the Book of Revelation, and is also strongly eschatological. In a poetic fashion we are given a glimpse of the glory that will

be. It is a vision of the saints, drawn “from every nation, race, tribe and language.” That vision speaks not only of the future, but also of the character of the church as it waits for and hopes for such a future. What does it say about a congregation that here is not comfortable with a variety of races, nationalities, and languages? Are they really praying that a kingdom will come that includes all of these things? The future is one of worship and praise. The life of the church now is a rehearsal for that as well.

The great crowd praising God has come through persecution and has been washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are those who have confessed their faith at great cost. But now, as the passage concludes, they will not weep again. So many of the Biblical images of the Kingdom are drawn together here. Not only are there no tears; there is no hunger, no thirst, and they will be led by their great shepherd to the springs of living water.

If the stress is on life after death, this passage is very helpful. It points to the constantly corporate character of that hope—not to the privatized hope we so often encounter in our congregations. It also can show the connection between future hope and present lifestyle. Both of these are appropriate for All Saints Day.

One final note: If this day is commemorated on Sunday, November 3, which is the first Sunday of the month, it may also be a communion Sunday. That would be quite appropriate, and would show the parallel with Worldwide Communion that occurred the month before. If communion is celebrated, then the tie would need to be clear between the text and the sacrament. It could also help in the choosing what one of the many possibilities is to be emphasized. Any one of them could be used, but the specific link would need to be made by the preacher, and would need to be taken into account in the development of the sermon.