

Wisdom 3:1-9, Psalm 24, Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

Happy Feast of All Saints! Unlike so many of our major feasts, today it is not a particular event in the life of Christ that we celebrate. We do not even celebrate today the story of a particular holy person, as we sometimes celebrate together, such as Francis of Assisi, or Mary the Mother of God.

But today we celebrate that “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” We celebrate all saints, famous and unknown. All those whose lives have touched others with their holiness, all those dear friends of God who now dwell in His nearer Presence.

And today is also a great day to celebrate the “Communion of Saints”, which we mention every Sunday in the Nicene Creed. The communion of saints is that great multitude of Christians that make up the whole Body of Christ. And the communion of saints does not refer only to those holy people who have died before us. It also refers to their brothers and sisters on earth. The communion of saints includes Christians living today who touch others’ lives with their holiness – some in great, impressive ways, and some in small and quiet, and equally holy ways.

And the communion of saints refers to each of us. We are part of the communion of saints. The Holy Spirit in baptism links us all to each other. We are the brothers and sisters of the great saints. And we are the brothers and sisters of each other.

As we celebrate All Saints’ Day, we celebrate every Christian who is a “capital S saint” – every Christian whose life was characterized by particular holiness, by particular joy in the love of Jesus Christ. And in God’s eyes, a “capital S saint” might be one of the famous saints we know of, but also includes the countless saints we’ve never heard of, but are known to God and celebrated in heaven. They get this anonymous moment of honor from us on All Saints’ Day. And we celebrate that we are connected to them all – the known and the unknown.

And for our gospel text on this day of celebration, we find the Beatitudes, from the Gospel according to St. Matthew. The beatitudes are an interesting Scripture passage. These verses are beautiful, and beloved, but I think they are also quite hard to read.

Are the beatitudes as a list of instructions for how a Good Christian should act? “Be merciful. Be meek. Be a peacemaker.” In some real sense that’s true. Jesus names characteristics of the Christian community in this list. But that doesn’t fully explain the nature of the beatitudes. Jesus isn’t instructing us to “mourn” even though those who mourn are named as “blessed”. He doesn’t command “be persecuted”.

But the beatitudes are also not a list of nine different kinds of good or beloved people. We can’t look for the one line that describes each of us, or pick which kind of person we want to be. If I am merciful, does that mean I don’t have to be pure in heart? Does that apply to someone else? If I strive to be a peacemaker, does that mean I don’t need to be meek? We can’t pick one or a few and then be “off the hook” for the others. So what shall we do with the beatitudes?

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is not simply handing out blessings as rewards to various people. That word – “blessed” (in Greek, *makarios*) might also be translated “happy” or perhaps even better, “fortunate” or “well-off”.

Jesus is saying that somehow, each of these characteristics that are found in the gathered Christian community, in the communion of saints, are good things – fortunate things - to be. Being a peacemaker makes us fortunate. Being pure in heart makes us well off. And even being in mourning, or being persecuted do not preclude us from also being blessed.

And this is because our current situation – of being pure, or merciful, or yearning for justice, or even mourning - our current situation is understood in the context of eternity.

I think that is how anyone can be brave enough to be meek in this world, when our inclination and society's values encourage us to seek and defend our own self-interest.

In the end, I think having a view of eternity is how we can face the darkness of the world, the persistence of human evil. We can never make our own selves perfect – can never live without sinning and harming others, even if we try to minimize the deep ways we hurt even those we love. Much less can we force everyone around us to be good, to always do right, or to be more attentive to the wrongs and injustices that we (even we ourselves) are all complicit in, and often complacent about.

Our hope for this world is an eternal hope. It is a hope that recognizes our own limitations and the limitations of all humans. It is a hope that God can do what human beings, on our own, cannot. A hope that looks at the meekness of God being driven to the Cross, and finds that through such apparent weakness, he displays the power of resurrection – the power to bring life out of death.

And that is why we disciples of Jesus are “fortunate”, because while we struggle - and should struggle - for at least some, at least a partial justice in this world, we actually can believe in and know that God will fully satisfy our hunger for justice when His kingdom comes in fullness.

I think that actually protects us from despair or helpless anger in the face of violence, and cruelty, and evil. It gives us enough hope to keep loving and doing as much as we can. Christianity has survived 20 centuries of human sin, and war, and tragedy because our hope and our vision *is* broader. Because we have in mind eternity. And so with each moment of our lives we can rejoice, even in the darkness, because we have seen the light of hope.

In fact, we are the light of hope to the world. That is what Jesus tells us right after he gives the Beatitudes – You are the light of the world. And for 20 centuries the saints of God have been. They have lived and loved despite darkness. Been courageous in the face of violence because they didn't need to fear death. They have had enough hope in the face of pain and hardship to reach out and serve others, believing that God will bring us to ultimate peace and justice.

And it's not just great and powerful leaders and saints who have shed this light on the world. I'm deeply moved by the fictional story of an “anonymous saint” from C. S. Lewis' book “The Great Divorce”.

In his book, Lewis imagines a guided visit to the afterlife in the style of Dante's Divine Comedy, and he presents various characters whose lives and decisions lead them to choose – or reject – entering heaven. And in it he describes what it might be like to encounter a saint. He writes this:

“First came bright Spirits, not the Spirits of men, who danced and scattered flowers. Then, on the left and right, at each side of the forest avenue, came youthful shapes, boys upon one hand, and girls upon the other. If I could remember their singing and write down the notes, no man who read that score would ever grow sick or old. Between them went musicians: and after these a lady in whose honour all this was being done.

I cannot now remember whether she was naked or clothed. If she were naked, then it must have been the almost visible penumbra of her courtesy and joy which produces in my memory the illusion of a great and shining train

that followed her across the happy grass. If she were clothed, then the illusion of nakedness is doubtless due to the clarity with which her inmost spirit shone through the clothes. For clothes in that country are not a disguise: the spiritual body lives along each thread and turns them into living organs. A robe or a crown is there as much one of the wearer's features as a lip or an eye.

But I have forgotten. And only partly do I remember the unbearable beauty of her face.

"Is it?...is it?" I whispered to my guide.

"Not at all," said he. "It's someone ye'll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green."

"She seems to be...well, a person of particular importance?"

"Aye. She is one of the great ones. Ye have heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things."

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"And who are all these young men and women on each side?"

"They are her sons and daughters."

"She must have had a very large family, Sir."

"Every young man or boy that met her became her son – even if it was only the boy that brought the meat to her back door. Every girl that met her was her daughter."

"Isn't that a bit hard on their own parents?"

"No. There are those that steal other people's children. But her motherhood was of a different kind. Those on whom it fell went back to their natural parents loving them more."

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"Every beast and bird that came near her had its place in her love. In her they became themselves. And now the abundance of life she has in Christ from the Father flows over into them."

I looked at my Teacher in amazement.

"Yes," he said. "It is like when you throw a stone into a pool, and the concentric waves spread out further and further. Who knows where it will end? Redeemed humanity is still young, it has hardly come to its full strength. But already there is joy enough in the little finger of a great saint such as yonder lady to waken all the dead things of the universe into life."

Sarah Smith stands for one of those anonymous saints. The countless unknown saints whom we particularly honor today. Our brothers and sisters who have brightened the world with their light without being sung or remembered. Sometimes without even recognizing it themselves.

And the endless, tireless love and service of such holy men and women – of all the saints – shines, like stars in the night. The effects of their holiness spread like ripples from a stone tossed in a pool. They lead many to God. And their lives and their prayers for us help us trust in the love and mercy of Jesus until he comes again.

Amen.