

A Dazzling Darkness



The Collect

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

First Reading Daniel 7:1-3,15-18

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter: "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever."

Second Reading Ephesians 1:11-23

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 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. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he 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.

Gospel Luke 6:20-31

Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

*There is in God, some say,
A deep but dazzling darkness.*

Please be seated.

Grace and peace to you this All Saints Sunday! I'm so glad that we are here, giving thanks for our life together on this our festival day and for all that it means to be thrown together into this messiness we call the church. For we are a mess, aren't we, when you consider what we're about on a day like this. It would seem that we cannot make up our minds. We are jubilant *and* mournful. We sing songs of the saints of God, children hang off the altar rail festooned as saints and superheroes, *and* we toll a bell as we remember our dead and read their names. We are here in the middle of the paradox of Christian belief: life out of death, light in the darkness, the clarion cry of Alleluia that we make even at the grave.

I, for one, love the mess. Indeed, if you ever find yourself in a church that offers you easy answers to questions we might have about the pain and longings of this life, please ask for your money back. Paradox is the hand we have been dealt. It's the only God on offer. For we must let go of trying to find our own way if we are ever to be found. We must know death if are to live.

No surprise then, that Jesus is a lover of paradox, as we heard in Luke's version of the beatitudes today:

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

I used to read those words every Tuesday night in my last church as we gathered for an informal eucharist in the round, drawing people who lived on the street together with the housed members of the parish. One of the most disheartening realizations I came to during those years as I got to know a good number of folks who slept in their cars, or behind bushes, or on park benches, was how much homelessness renders people both invisible and as someone whom others are desperate to make disappear. Talk about living with paradox. Jesus' admonition to *'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you'* was not instruction for if and when such things might happen, it was their daily experience.

I learned an incredible amount about faithfulness from those men and women, about what the poet John Vaughan calls the 'dazzling darkness' of God. Their capacity to do good unto others, even as others refused to do good unto them, drew on a belief in the presence of a good and gracious God in a world where for them goodness and graciousness were in short supply. In getting to know them, week by week, year by year, it seemed to me that they had encountered something more than the meager hope their lives looked to be inhabiting from the outside; they had met a shimmering kind of presence in the dark night that interrupted the lies the world had been telling them about their worth and helped them see themselves for who they truly were. They had seen the light we see through the cracks, as Leonard Cohen once sang.

Their lives also offered me a lesson on sainthood. Sainthood is not the glory of what we do with our lives, it is the glory of God visible in us when we become who we truly are. To be a saint is to be a person one who has come home to themselves. It is to be as one who is at last free to be who God knows them to be. To be a saint is to be yourself. It's that simple, yet we will spend a lifetime trying to do anything other than live into that grace-filled invitation. We are so in love with our own power that we fail to discover our own truth.

So, good for you for being here. You've come to the right place. For, please don't mistake the spectacularly beautiful flowers, or the glorious music, or the fine food and fellowship in the church hall we'll enjoy after this service, for the point of all this. The point is you, and your finitude, and the opening lying before you to break out of the drama of your ego and your disappointments with this world, and grasp the 'life that really is life' as Paul's first letter to Timothy puts it.

We remember the dead today so that we might wake up and live.

We sing of the saints of God today so that something might happen to stop us in our busyness and our anxious press to be productive and powerful and remember our saintliness; to remember what you and I look like from the vantage point of heaven.

It makes me think of a beautiful story I heard told at a funeral of a family friend of ours, about the day the deceased's younger brother was brought home from the hospital. She had managed to persuade her parents that she needed to spend some time with the little fellow as he lay in his crib, and so keeping the door open so they could see and hear what was going on, they watched their daughter tiptoe over to the crib, lean over, and ask this question of her baby brother, *'Could you tell me about heaven, I'm beginning to forget'*.

Such is our invitation to the world around us: come here and remember the heaven you come from; come here and become who you really are.

The invitational element of it all matters because left to our own devices, we will carry blithely on, too preoccupied with ourselves to see the person who is so fervently moving a mile a minute through the world. People will need you to invite them into a place like this so they might have a chance to see who they really are, so they will get an opportunity to remember the God who made them.

Yet, they will need to hear that invitation just as we need to hear it, because it takes other people to help us see who we are. For when our lives bump into other people's lives in ways that seek to see the saintliness of others, then a new awareness emerges.

Perhaps your life might start to draw near to others because of this church this year. What might that look like?

Perhaps it would look like the lawyer, who, utterly accustomed to the order of their thoughts and the power of their arguments, is reduced to a blubbing wreck in the Threads clothing store as they watch a child try on the first pair of new school shoes they have ever worn.

Or perhaps it would look like the banker showing up at the doorstep of refugee families who speak barely any English but who know there is a person at the front door who is in this for them.

Or maybe it would look like the teachers and tax managers who because of this church join hands to march on these city streets, joyfully proclaiming how 'God takes pride in you' to every beloved child of God.

The truth of the matter is that we need community. We need each other to become who we are. And without a doubt the world is filled with people waiting to have their saintliness recognized and honored if only somebody would step out of the familiar places of their own lives and come to know them.

So, there's the invitation of today: saintliness. As you watch the banners carried high and the baskets of our pledges made to this church laid at the foot of the altar, perhaps you might also ask how God is calling on you to become visible to others through the life and ministries of this church. You have made your financial pledge to the saints, may that now be a sign and foretaste of the pledge of your life here. Don't wait to make this one, wild and precious life count. Learn who you truly are and dive into the mess of the Church in this place so your life might also learn to sing a song of the saints of God, faithful and bold and true. Amen.