

The Feast of All Saints has a long history in the church. It was first observed in Syria in the late 4th century. For the preceding 300 years, countless Christians had been martyred in the great tribulation of persecution, giving witness to Christ with their very lives, shedding their lifeblood as a confession of His name. The church there had a calendar similar to what we do today, certain days in the year set aside to commemorate, remember, and give thanks for particular martyrs. But after 300 years, there were so many that there was no way to have a day for each of them, so one day was chosen to commemorate all those who had given their lives for the Faith.

This practice spread throughout the Empire, though the day varied from place to place, until May 13, 609, in Rome, the great Pantheon, the temple built to honor all the pagan gods of Rome, was re-dedicated by the Church as the Church of St. Mary and All Martyrs, a place to honor all the saints. That fixed the date for everyone in the Church to honor all those who died for the Faith, until about 150 years later when it was moved to November 1, the date we observe today.

So today began as a remembrance of all the martyrs, those countless, and in many cases, nameless brothers and sisters in Christ who died for the sake of what we confessed in the Creed. It has broadened a bit over the years. After all, we don't call it All Martyrs' Day, but All Saints' Day. So who is a saint? To be a saint is quite simple. A saint is a forgiven sinner. So the holy martyrs are saints, and worthy of special recognition for not loving their lives even unto death. The great heroes of the faith from Old and New Testament times and through the twenty centuries since are saints, worthy of recognition for their role in salvation history, and for their examples of faith and holy living that we can imitate.

Also considered saints are those whom we especially think about today, the forgiven sinners of this congregation, of our families and circle of friends, who have come out of the great tribulation. We give thanks that they are safe and secure with Christ, delivered from their weeping, free from strife, no longer subject to temptation, sin, or a bad conscience. We are comforted by continued fellowship with them, we remain united in Christ, our Lord and theirs with whom they now rest in peace. And we look forward to the great and final day of resurrection and life forever with them in Christ's kingdom.

This truth is beautifully expressed on the bulletin. The blest communion and divine fellowship of the Church, what occurs at every Holy Communion, includes the holy angels, but also the massive company of the faithful departed. This is one of the blessings and comforts of the Holy Sacrament. To go to the cemetery is a fine and beautiful thing. We show our love for the departed in caring for and decorating the place where their mortal remains sleep, awaiting the resurrection. But when we miss them, when we desire to be close to them, who they are, that personality, that part of them which even now is alive, there is no closer place to be to them than the altar. There is where you come before the very Lord that they are continually before, with whom they live even now, and in whom they and we are united.

But for the rest of the sermon today, I want to speak about the other part of that fellowship of the holy church, those represented in today's artwork kneeling at the bottom, their backs turned to us. Those figures represent you. For you also are a saint, a forgiven sinner, one whose robe has been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. This is one of the great biblical truths that was recovered in the Reformation, what we commemorated a week ago.

Sainthood is not something that is reached by our efforts. The saints are not those select few who somehow manage to overcome their imperfections by their strivings, who are able by their efforts to attain some super level of holiness above and beyond what we can. Sainthood, to be a saint, is simply to have the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus, to cling to His holiness and righteousness that are promised and given to us in the Gospel. So it is not to lofty, unrelatable super saints that our Lord speaks in today's Gospel, but to His disciples, to all who would hear Him and who in hearing Him would believe in Him. To His saints, to you, He speaks a nine-fold blessing.

His promised blessings are not how the world speaks of being blessed. Blessedness as given by Jesus is founded upon two things that you have now. Jesus says in the first of these blessings that the kingdom of heaven, life with God, is yours now because you know and confess your own poverty of spirit. That is, a saint recognizes that he, on his own, is a sinner, has no blessedness or righteousness of his own, and needs the forgiveness which Christ has come to give.

The second foundation, what is yours now, is how the Father in heaven regards your sufferings for the sake of His Son's name. The world sees what is different about you and mocks you. For the early martyrs, the world, the empire, their neighbors and own family saw, and hated them, handed them over, tortured, and killed them. When you bear such reviling and persecution, when you are the butt of jokes and labels are thrown at you, should the day come when it is much more, your Father in heaven treasures that. They are in His sight, the most valuable war medals.

So already, in what we have, being the people of God, having His love and delight in us, we are taught to view things differently. "Blessedness," is different for the Christian than it is for the world. Blessedness is not having some painless, never inconvenienced good fortune. Jesus counts you blessed when? When you mourn. When you are meek. When you hunger and thirst for righteousness. When you are merciful. When you are pure in heart. When you seek to make peace, and when you are persecuted. In all these, are promises not of what you have now in those things, but what you *will* have in full one day.

We do not look for a perfect life in this world. We do not put our hopes in somehow managing to put this world to right, eliminating all war, injustice, and sorrow. That will not happen. Jesus says here in part, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial, that there are wars, rumors of wars, men turning against one another, and even creation itself coming undone." The fulfillment of blessedness, of consolation, and peace, comes after all this, that is where our hope is directed.

And yet as any Christian who mourns knows, as you who long for the righteousness that comes from Christ know, there are beginnings of what is promised here in this life. We mourn not as those without hope. We mourn and sorrow, and yet we do receive comfort, even as we long for the resurrection of the dead and a happy reunion in resurrected glory. You come here to the Lord's Table, weak and weary in soul, and already in this life, today, and throughout your days you receive Christ's body and blood as your highest good.

And to the degree that you do not find perfect comfort in your mourning, but miss those you love all your days, or that you fail to be meek and selfless, that you long for the fleshpots of Egypt and this world's joys, that you are not totally merciful as Your Father in heaven is merciful, that you are not totally pure in heart, but your thoughts and desires are soiled with sin, that you are not constantly working toward peace between yourself and others, where there remains in your Christian life, lack and need for growth, there you see what your Lord, and He alone, has fully done already, the blessings and righteousness that is credited to you now by faith, and what will be yours in eternity.