

All Saints Nov 5 2006

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10, 13-14

Psalms 149

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints is a special day in the life of the church because it reminds us that we are mortal and yet our eternal future hopes in God. On this high feast day of the church we remember those who have shared in our human journey and whose home is now in the eternal embrace of the Triune God. The saints, famous or ordinary are those who recognized the blessedness of God's kingdom, unfolding in our day, in every day, everywhere, as those who sought their home in God. Blessed are those who see a kingdom of God kind of life as a life of service, of unconditional loving service to all of God's people. Being one who lives the blessed life means taking the Gospel seriously and taking our baptismal promises seriously.

Perhaps a few examples will help us all remember the witness of those whose lives have been both salt and light to fellow pilgrims. Consider Perpetua and her companions martyred at Carthage in 202 C.E. Christians like Perpetua were brutally tortured in an arena, savaged by wild animals and executed for nothing more than their faith. It is a long way from Carthage in 202 to St. Paul's Poplar Springs Maryland 2006 but how far is it from the risk of standing up in faith for the poor, for the marginal, for our neighbors who suffer discrimination, rejection, violence, hunger, and pain? Shrinking congregations are not as alarming as shrinking hearts. Few of us have had to suffer physical persecution for our faith, but we may have suffered in other ways for being too inclusive, too radical in our assertions that the banquet table of God reaches out to everyone. Jesus warned the disciples that a time would come when the "love of many will grow cold." (Matt 24:12) Buffered as we may be from violent crises that cost Perpetua and her companions their lives, passion for the gospel must not be allowed to grow cold lest we find ourselves infected with apathy and fear and the gospel go unheard by the multitudes that hunger for spiritual food.

Constance and her companions remembered on Sept 9 are often called the martyrs of Memphis. When yellow fever hit the city, those who could flee left for St. Louis, west of the Mississippi river, doctors, nurses, health care professionals among those who choose to retired to higher ground. Constance and her companions remained in Memphis, to care for those too poor to leave, those too sick to leave, and in so doing died of the same disease in their turn. What would these Martyrs of Memphis think of our church today? In our day, there are those like Bono who have consistently advocated for AIDS victims, while too many individual believers retired to higher ground. We too live in an epidemic of viral causation leaving millions to despair and destruction. Constance and her companions remind us that being faithful to God means being present with those who suffer. Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, profoundly human and entirely divine. If we embrace the incarnate truth as a way of life we will understand that we ought not fear getting dirty but fear that we don't get dirty enough. Like the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies giving birth to new wheat and bearing fruit, we too must be willing to be plunged into the earth, where we too may be changed from seed to living plants.

In 1380 the twenty-fifth child of the Benincasa family was named Catherine – she would be famous for her visions as a spiritual pilgrim whose deepest longing is communion with God. Catherine of Siena lived on the margin enclosed in a dark room where to the outsider, she would appear mentally insane, but wherein she experienced God. Catherine lived in the same world we do but she saw it differently. She saw it as God's world, the world of God's making and God's redeeming, the God in whom there is no darkness, only light. Catherine of Siena represents those on the margins we ignore today, those that see the world in different ways, who are among the homeless who sleep in cars and alleyways, who fear the shelters and the police. The tired, harassed and abused aids who hold the hands of the dying, who care for orphans unwanted and rejected, who see in these strangers the face of another human being. Catherine had one desire – only one – to know the Lord and in compassion and grace, God blessed her.

Julian of Norwich also walked to the beat of a different drummer, believing that visions were as rational as logic. Confessing with Jesus that God is Spirit (John 4:24), those who would See God must be able to see the spirit as well as the substance of this world. Do not mistake memory for vision: they are not the same. When the disciples experienced Jesus after the resurrection, it is often the case that Jesus risen was not as they remembered Jesus in the flesh. We must be open to spiritual direction, spiritual insight, in order to be open to God's intention for us. Dame Julian's vision was that all things can be well, will be well, shall be well. It was a call to see the world with eyes of the Spirit of God, to see beyond the limits of our weakness, our own powers and abilities to look for the possibility of God working in us, through us, among us.

Yesterday, Katharine Jefferts-Schori preached at her investiture as the 26th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church on the text of Luke 4 that has Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Our new PB stressed the yearning of all of nature all people, all the created earth, for the Shalom of God, which can only come when all brothers and sisters are welcomed home like the prodigal son. No person can be left outside the circle, hungry, afraid, sick, poor, but the church is called to build a house where all are welcome. Katharine said it is the job description given us in our baptism. We are called as the prophets, mystics; the Incarnate Word made flesh, the Son of God, to have the same vision of Shalom. Abundant life can only be achieved in solidarity with all of God's creation. None of us can have a holy peace while others are hungry, afraid, left on the margin of humanity to die of poverty or AIDS, or neglect. What keeps us from experiencing the vision of God, the Shalom of God? Katharine suggested it is fear and apathy: fear of being rejected or ridiculed reduces us to apathy. If we would allow the hope that is Christ in us to rejuvenate our faith, our love, we too would see this world in a new light. We would begin to see a world without poverty, without HIV/AIDS, without malaria, where all children attend primary school, one world, one family of humanity, one God, one creation, then the Scriptures would be fulfilled in our hearing and in our doing.

The way for us to be salt of the earth and light to the world is to live the beatitudes deliberately, to take them seriously as a model for that “kingdom of God kind of life.” We too must see the beatitudes as an invitation to live our baptismal promises.

You are blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God’s spirit.

You are blessed when you feel you have lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You are blessed when you are content with just who you are – no more, no less. That is the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that cannot be bought.

You are blessed when you have worked up a good appetite for God. God is food and drink in the best meal you will ever eat.

You are blessed when you care. At the moment of being full of cares, you will find yourself cared for.

You are blessed when you get your inside world, your mind and your heart, put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You are blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That is when you discover who you really are and your place in God’s family.

You are blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you deeper into God’s kingdom.

Not only that-count yourself blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit you. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens-give a cheer, even, for though they don’t like it, God does. Know you are in good company, for all the prophets and witnesses we remember this day as saints got into the same kind of trouble. (Matthew 5:3-12, in Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, NavPress, 2002).