

All Saints' Day 2020

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us (RSV).

These words from the 12 chapter of Hebrews seem especially appropriate as we join with fellow Christians around the world today in celebrating All Saints' Day.

We are truly surrounded by what this author calls ‘a great crowd of witnesses’ – faithful followers of Jesus, both past and present, who point us towards the finish line.

What is All Saints' Day?

Is it just a day on which we remember a special class of the especially holy, those who have received some sort of recognition by a church body? Or, is its focus more inclusive?

If we know our New Testament, we know the latter to be the case. *Hagios*, the Greek word from which ‘saint’ comes means ‘set apart’.

And this is the calling of every baptised member of Christ’s body . . . to be set apart for service to Christ and neighbour. It’s your calling and my calling.

The big-name folk -- Saints with a capital ‘S’ -- tell us it is possible, living the Christian life can be done.

They serve are our guides . . . but so do the many ordinary Christians we have known over the years, some of whom are still with us, but many others who sing the Lord’s song, but on another shore and in a greater light.

Early this past Thursday morning, I received a text notification that the power had gone off at the church . . . it had already gone off at my house.

Not being able to do much else, I decided to drive to the church and make sure everything was okay.

It took some doing to find a route where there were no trees across the road, but I eventually made it, arriving a little after seven.

Sure enough, the power was off and the church was dark excepted for a few emergency lights in passageways.

I don't know what possessed me, but I went into the church, lite the candles on the Altar and went and sat mid-way back in the nave.

As I did, I closed my eyes and remembered the many saints of St. Luke's, in particular those who were no longer with us.

In many cases, I could remember where they sat. Truly, I found myself surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

As their faces passed before my eyes, I gave thanks for every one of them . . . for what they meant to me personally and to the church as a whole. I must tell you it was a very moving exercise.

They rest from their labours, but their good works do follow them. And based on the promises of Scriptures, I verily expect to meet them again.

This is what All Saints' is about. It is a day to remember, give thanks, be encouraged and carry on.

At this point, let me encourage *you* to remember those saints dear to you. Let their faces pass before your eyes this morning.

Give thanks for their witness. Know that only a thin veil separates the church in heaven from the church on earth. We are members of one body, and one day we shall meet again.

What is a saint?

Well, it has been said that a saint is an ordinary sinner with an extraordinary Saviour, and I think that is about as good a definition as one can give.

The hymnwriter puts us onto the right track when she says:

**“They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still;
the world is bright with the
joyous saints
who love to do Jesus’ will.”**

She concludes with these words: **“I mean to be one too!”**

Can you say these words and really mean them? I hope you can.

But, how do we go about becoming a saint?

Well, I think we can find an important pointer in this morning's Old Testament lesson.

As today's passage opens, the children of Israel remain at the base of Mt. Sinai. The unfortunate and disastrous Golden Calf incident lay behind them. New Tables of the Law had been produced and brought down from the mountaintop.

Then Moses receives a word from the Lord that it is time to move on . . . to continue their journey towards the Promised Land.

Verse 1: And the Lord said unto Moses, Depart, and go up hence, thou and the people

which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt.”

So far so good, but in the verse that follows comes devastating news. Here, God says: “**And I will send an angel before thee.**”

Why is that so devastating? Well, it all hinges on the article ‘an’.

Let me explain. In the early books of the Bible, there is a big difference between *an* angel and *the* angel of the LORD.

The latter – the Angel of the LORD – refers to the presence of Yahweh Himself, quite likely a manifestation of the pre-existent Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity.

The Angel of the LORD, for example, spoke with Moses out of the burning bush and had been meeting regularly with Moses.

But, *an* angel of the Lord is just any ministering spirit sent by God. It's someone good, but not God Himself.

Moses understands this all too clearly, and that is why in verse 15 we hear him crying out:

“If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence.”

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, a great saint and preacher of the 20th century, speaks of Moses' dilemma in this way:

“To be given every other blessing is of no value if God is not with you. What is the value of Canaan? What is the value of milk and honey? What is the value of having possessions, if God was not with them?”

In the end, God's accepted Moses plea and promised to travel with the children of Israel.

That was good news for Moses and all the people.

But, what does this have to do with us and with being a saint? I want to suggest that another definition of a saint might be: **one who travels with God.**

It's not enough to have great material blessings.

It's not enough to be endowed with talents innumerable.

It's not enough to have great health?

It's not enough to have friends in high places.

All of these are very nice, great blessings, but they are also very transient. They can be snatched away in a twinkling of an eye.

What we need is God Himself . . . God travelling alongside us on the road of life.

I recently encountered a sad case. It involves a young man who had been left a modest trust fund.

The sad thing is that instead of using that trust fund as a springboard for doing great things, it became a crutch and an excuse for doing nothing.

He never, as far as I know, worked a day in his life. Instead, he spent his life (and continues to do so) wandering around, never settling down, having no goals or ambitions.

To make matters worse, he spent many years making himself miserable by worrying about someone taking advantage of him or the bank mismanaging his little nest egg.

Well, he doesn't have to worry about this anymore. It's all gone away, and, as a result, he is a broken man.

All of which is to say that it is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in lesser blessings.

The supreme question is not what I have in the bank, what talents I possess, how many friends I have, but:

Is the Lord among us, or is He not?

If He is not, no matter what else we have, like Moses of old we need to plead for His presence, to make that our top priority.

“If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence,” we need to cry out.

What is the road of a saint? It is going God's way and in His presence.

With whom *are* you travelling this morning?

In 1939, George VI in his Christmas broadcast quoted some lives that have become famous. They go like this:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

These words spoken in 1939 remain relevant in the midst of all the uncertainty we face in 2020 and beyond. Want to be a saint? A successful saint? An example for others? One of those witnesses spoken of by the writer of Hebrews? /// Put your hand into the hand of the Man of Galilee and go forward.