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Hertford, NC

RCL Year A All Saints Sunday – November 2, 2008

ALL SAINTS 2008

An old Zen saying goes, “Before enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water; after enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water.” Something of the same thing could be said about the “saints” we honor in this Feast of All Saints.

For these ordinary women and men of the faith did not have the “golden tongue” of St. John Chrysostom, or the mystical insight of St. John of the Cross, or the ecstatic visions of St. Teresa of Avila or the grace of Julian of Norwich. They did not necessarily work miracles of healing or make prophetic utterances or build religious orders or oversee the construction of basilicas that would tower over the world. Nor were they “doctors of doctrine” or sculptors of confessions and creeds.

Most of the time, they simply “chopped wood and carried water” for God ... perhaps reading Bible stories to the kids at night, or getting them dressed and off to church. It is a time to remember that great host of witnesses who have preceded us and still are our examples in the Christian life. As the Church remembers the death and Resurrection of Jesus, so it also remembers the faithful who lived and died in Jesus and in hope in the resurrection of the dead. Those who witnessed to the Lordship of Jesus in the face of death, the martyrs, are remembered. Those who were great teachers and bishops are remembered. And the common believers, housekeepers and laborers, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, faithful one and all, are remembered. Some visited a dying friend or made a significant pledge to an orphanage, or went to talk to a drunk about a way out of hell. These are the saints we remember today.

Look around you. Do these look like ‘saints’ to you? They should. The congregation of the faithful. The Body of Christ. The fellowship of the Spirit. The community of hope. Ordinary people. The rank and file. The unexceptional and undecorated. As the marvelous little hymn we just sang testifies, saints are people you can meet “in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea.” They are folks “just like me.” Their distinctiveness (which is generally played down) is that these “ordinary people” have placed themselves in the hands of an extraordinary God.

Alan Paton, the great novelist and leader of the reform movement in South Africa against Apartheid, claimed that he wrote his book on the life of Francis of Assisi called *Instrument of Thy Peace* “for sinner, for those who with all their hearts wish to be better, purer, less selfish, and more useful.” He wrote it, in other words, for saints who sin.

Paton then went on to say that there are two things needed for the “sainthood” we celebrate today. Interestingly, he did not include the stock liturgical or sacramental definition of being a “saint” ... that is, “one who is baptized.” He knew of the Hitlers and Stalins, those baptized and abhorrent, not to mention the millions of white South Africans

who perpetuated and fought for the evil system of apartheid. Could one honestly refer to them as “saints” without laughing out loud?

Paton said that two things were needed to be God’s “instruments of peace.” One, we followers of Jesus were to never doubt that God can use us if we are willing to be used, no matter what our weaknesses. And two, we were also to see that God can use any other person who is willing to be used, whatever his or her weaknesses. If need be, we were to encourage the hesitant with this truth of their usability.

All Saints day is one of the most ancient festivals of the Church. It started with the earliest martyrs, remembering them for their faith. Commemorations for the ‘birthday’ of one to eternal life is what it was called. It became a time, November 1st, to remember those in the congregation who had served God faithfully. There is nothing morbid in this remembrance, for to remember belongs to God and is a higher capacity of our humanity. Those who cannot/will not remember are doomed to repeat past mistakes and to degenerate into thankless creatures with no roots. Look around you on these walls at your roots!

As the bell tolls we REMEMBER. The deeds and faith of the common folk resound as mightily to the glory of God as the great names of old.

BUT it is also a day for those of us still living. It is the day we, as Christians, celebrate our sainthood with all the saints here and now, and in every place and in every time. For we, the Christians of all times and places, are literally “the holy one,” usually translated “the saints.”

Most of us probably do not think of ourselves as saints and certainly not as holy ones. That would seem to class us with those pious, righteous souls who never seem to have any fun and who appear so removed from our worlds that we cannot imagine our lives touching theirs. The truth of the matter is more probably that those whom we so classify are more lonely than pious, more shy than righteous, and our avoidance of them more fear of something in ourselves than of something in them. Whatever the case might be, the New Testament classifies us all as saints, the pious and the not so pious.

It is the grace of God in Jesus Christ that makes us holy, not our acts or lack of the same. It all began with a cross ... the cross men and women devised to destroy him whose holiness shed the light of truth upon what was in them. And yet, ironically, in that cross of hate abounded his love, calling us back to himself, making us his holy ones.

A saint is simply a person who believes that in Jesus Christ sin has been forgiven. We are not perfect or sinless for we are after all, living. Saints are the sinning saved. But at least we are no longer hopelessly sinful. The power of the Risen Christ is working in us all the time causing us each day to repent of our sins and urging us always toward a new life. “We continue to sin, but just enjoy it less.”

So the “saints of God” are ‘just’ folk like you and me. But we also, deep down, somehow think that they must be superhuman too. When they stub their toe in the middle of the night going to the bathroom they say “Hosanna in the Highest!” When they are stuck in traffic they sing “Joy to the world.” They always live ‘victoriously.’

Yea, Right...

One day the master announced that a young monk had reached an advanced state of enlightenment. The news caused a stir in the monastery.

Some of the monks went out to see the young monk. Upon finding him, they asked, "We heard that you are enlightened. Is that true?"

"It is," the monk replied.

"And how do you feel?" they asked

"As miserable as ever," replied the monk.

The willingness to be used as an instrument of God. And the willingness to see that possibility of others being used in the same way. If we are moving from "strength to strength" in this life orientation we are being saints. For, in the last analysis, it is not what we do for God that counts, but what God does through us.

If the "Communion of Saints" is being faithful to having the life of Christ expressed through its personality, the Gospel is proclaimed. We are living the words of Jesus, "I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (Jn. 14:10).

If we yield to our life goal to be God's instruments of peace, sooner or later we come to the realization of what the French Jesuit said: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." (Chardin)