

Traditionally on All Saints Day we celebrate the martyrs and other men and women whose lives demonstrated their faithfulness to God and witness to the Good News in Christ, as well as the teachers of the church. All Saints Day became popular by the 5th century. About 500 years later the church started celebrating All Souls Day for the likes of you and me. And yes there is a distinction between the two celebrations but the definition of saint is of someone who is set apart and made holy. We are all set apart in baptism and made holy. Look around the room this morning. We are all saints. No, that doesn't mean that we are all perfect human beings, righteous in the sight of God, self-sacrificing, and always responding in love.

Good, I'm glad we've got that straight. Not that there was much question mind you, and of course I speak only for myself. Nor does it mean that we have performed some kind of miracle that can be corroborated by others. On the other hand it does mean that in baptism we have been buried with Christ in his death and therefore share in his resurrection, reborn by the Holy Spirit. We have been set apart and marked as Christ's own forever. That should be enough for any of us as we struggle to live out our baptismal covenant.

Today we are smooshing All Saints and All Souls together since I would be hard pressed to get most of us to come to church 2 days in a row. But there is something bigger here even than the question of who deserves to be called a saint. And that's our understanding of the "Communion of Saints". The Communion of Saints is the whole body of all those who have believed, both the living and the dead. This includes all those who have died before us, those who have gone ahead to be with God and who we hope, wait for us to join them in a time when we will be together with God as well as the al living who gather in worship and praise around the world. Whenever we say the Apostles Creed we avow our belief in The Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the life everlasting. That's a lot of believing and a pretty good summation of what happened because Jesus Christ came and lived among us, was crucified, died, and rose again. And the Communion of Saints gives us a foot in both worlds, in the here and now and in the life to come. In popular parlance "we are not alone."

Last week when I was talking with Leia and Aleah, Aleah asked me what happens to us after we die. I am afraid I couldn't give her a really clear answer about what happens physically but we do have Jesus promises about being with him always. Our three readings for All Saints Day are also suggested for funeral services because they all contain references to our hope of resurrection.

These references are not exactly detailed and they differ from the popular conception of heaven floating around up there with God seated on a throne in the clouds. To the ancient world up there was a great unknown but since we managed to launch ourselves into space back in the late 1950' we know that space is vast, it's cold and it's populated with an uncountable number of stars and more than 2 trillion galaxies. So really with have to come up with another understanding of just where God is but for now heaven is probably as good of a symbol as any.

Our reading from Wisdom says that the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, they are at peace and their hope is full of immortality, moreover immortality is anything but quiet. It sounds like they will be quite busy shining forth, running like sparks, and governing the nations. But above all "the faithful will abide with him in love because grace and mercy are

upon his holy ones.” The point of this passage is that being dead isn’t so bad for the dead, it’s just very hard on the living and this image of hope for those who have died is meant to give us a different perspective.

Abiding with God in love is also at the heart of our reading from Revelation, the last book of the bible in which John of Patmos’s wild visions of the end times portray Christ’s coming again in judgment to bring life to the faithful and death to the wicked. We hear that God will bring a new heaven and earth and God’s dwelling will be among us. This new creation affects not just human beings but all of creation because the earth will be made new as well. Best of all however is that God will no longer be distant from us but will dwell with us in this new creation, in the New Jerusalem.

Our reading from the gospel of John about the raising of Lazarus is not entirely helpful about the physicality of life after death because Lazarus is raised from the dead and not resurrected. Lazarus came out as he had gone in. He was not transformed when he tottered out of the grave. His friends and family recognized him and for all we know he went back to his everyday life after they got those strips of cloth unwound. This is unlike what happened to Jesus. Jesus was resurrected – he did not appear as he had in life, it took a while for the women and the disciples to recognize him, moreover he didn’t stick around to resume his old life, he returned to his Father in heaven. And like Jesus, we look for the resurrection of the dead, not just being brought back to life.

John’s gospel speaks several times of resurrection in Chapter 6 but I think that the following line is most helpful “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.” (Joh 6:40 NRS) Bottom line... our story as Christians is about how God’s steadfast love and mercy triumph over sin and death. When we are raised that love will be fulfilled in a new life with a perfected relationship with God.

How all this will happen is a mystery but in one of his visionary moments in 1 Corinthians Paul says: *“Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: Death has been swallowed up in victory.”* *“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”* (1Co 15:51-55 NRS)

This brings us back to the Communion of Saints.

Mother Paulette used to say that this congregation really worshipped. And I would echo her sentiments. St. Paul’s is steeped in the prayers of all who have gone before, it is a holy place, a sacred space. A couple of months ago I was celebrating the Wednesday Eucharist with Conni and Jeannine. They were sitting up in the chancel and I was behind the altar. You would think when I looked out to begin the Eucharistic prayer that all I would see was empty space but it wasn’t empty. No I wasn’t seeing ghosts but I could feel the presence of all those saints, our communion of saints who had prayed in this place for the last 135 years. It was eerie and

beautiful and comforting all at the same time. I shared my feeling with them and they both agreed as if were a matter if course. "Duh."

And so I will close with the quotation from the letter to the Hebrews, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."* (Heb 12:1-2 NRS)

Amen