



All Saints' Day
November 1, 2020
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Come Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

“I, John, looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice saying salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.” (The Revelation to John 7.9-10)

It's hard to imagine an image more at odds with the sense of reality that many of us face in these final days before the election.

The *whole earth* is included in this picture of God's salvation: refugees, sexual minorities, Muslims, disabled people, Democrats and Socialists, powerful women, undocumented immigrants, people of color—**every** nation, **all** tribes and peoples and languages. Salvation belongs to our God and to Jesus.

Tradition tells us that an elder named John is writing this letter in exile from the island of Patmos late in the first century. He writes it to seven churches who need encouragement in the face of Roman oppression. Tradition also tells us that John hailed from Ephesus, site of one of the important churches included in the letter.

The Romans had recently built in Ephesus a new temple for the worship of the Emperor Domitian. The cult worshipped the emperor's ancestors as well, Vespasian, and Titus, who had had destroyed Jerusalem. Moreover, the cult enforced participation in sacrifices and festivals to the Emperor, and was a central and widespread social, political, economic, and religious factor in the lives of provincial citizens.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/revelation/white.html> Accessed 2020.10.30

In other words, the epistle this morning details a Christian response to the temptation to the political, social and cultural idolatry of the tools, crafts, and oppression of the Roman Empire. It's not hard to see some echoes with our current situation here is it. Political parties, programs, policies, candidates – symbols of Empire- have become the objects of idolatry that many of us have embraced. What I want to suggest is that we are in danger of misunderstanding where our true citizenship lies. As important as the practice of politics is – it is one way to build the Kingdom of God—the practice of politics is not meant to be our primary identity as Christians.

And I think that is why many of us are in danger of giving in to anger, fear and despair: we are placing existential importance on the cult of the Emperor and how that plays out in the election. We believe somehow that God is too small to handle all this. And of course, the anxiety is heightened by the tenacity of the COVID-19 virus. The steps necessary to tame it until effective treatments and vaccines are widely available put incredible pressure on all of us, especially the most vulnerable.

Which brings us to the Beatitudes.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus declares that the poor, the mournful, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure-hearted, the peaceful, and the persecuted are “blessed.” Does this square with our observations? The Beatitudes must have seemed like wishful thinking to their first hearers. And frankly, they likely sound like wishful thinking to us. Does it really appear like the meek are inheriting the earth?

Jesus in his wisdom recognizes this disparity and addresses it in the very wording of the beatitudes: “Blessed *are...*for they *will be.*” It’s already and not yet. Jesus is describing is what God’s character looks like. What things are like in their essential truth, when we pull back the curtain. The way God has set up the world. Where real life and real joy and real truth reside.

Blessed ones are those whose lives are congruent with the character and heart of God. Blessed are we who learn to trust Jesus’ description of the character of God and God’s reality. The Beatitudes describe the life created and lived, in bits and pieces, in fits and starts, by the saints among us—who are you and me—as well as those of blessed memory who we remember in particular today, who inspire us to keep living in the already and not yet.

The Biblical definition of saint is any baptized Christian living in community. And I don’t have to tell you that we saints in the church are far from perfect: I love this description of us that comes from Eugene Peterson’s book Practicing Resurrection:

“We continue to maintain this identity as saints by keeping company with people who have firsthand knowledge of who we are: men and women blessed, chosen, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, gathered up—by God! These same people embarrass us with their haphazardness, exhilarate us with their joy, offend us by their inconsistent lives, comfort us with their compassion, bully and criticize us, encourage us and bring the best out of us, bore us with their blandness, stimulate us with their enthusiasm.

But we don’t choose them. God chooses them. We keep company with the men and women God chooses. These saints.” (Eugene Peterson, *Practicing Resurrection*, p. 84)

Our Catechism in the Prayer Book says that the Communion of Saints is “the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those who we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer and praise.” p. 362

The Beatitudes are the living constitution for the Communion of Saints.

When saints recognize empty places in people’s hearts including their own, saints bring in the love of the God’s Kingdom. When saints encounter mourning, saints are the ones who comfort. When saints encounter meekness, saints give strength and dignity. When saints encounter hunger and thirst for righteousness, saints work to meet that thirst. When saints encounter the need for mercy, saints offer it.



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When saints encounter purity of heart, saints reflect the love of God. When saints encounter conflict, saints work for peace. The Beatitudes describe the reality of the Kingdom of God, co-created by the saints who walk among us, which is you and me. And we're inspired by those who have gone before us in this work.

It's not without risks. Saints die figurative and literal deaths in this world as they reveal and bring into being the character of God's kingdom. But the reward is great.

And so, in this time of great anxiety, we strive to keep the biggest possible picture in view. In the face of Empire and of Virus, the Communion of Saints brings into focus the more vast and permanent kingdom. As the Rev. King reminded us, "The moral arc of the universe is long, and it bends toward justice." We keep in our heart the vision of John, of all creation as one, giving thanks and praise to God and to the Lamb. The saints, on heaven and earth, reveal and bring to light the Blessedness of the Beatitudes.

Amen.