



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday November 1st, 2015 Trinity XXII
All Saints Day

"...and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: and he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The feast of All Saints is not merely a day to remember those we first think of when we think of "saints." We're not commemorating just those saints who have painted icons and saints for whom we have named our churches, such as blessed Stephen. Nor are we commemorating our personal patron saints. All Saints Day is, as its name implies, a day to commemorate *all saints*; that is, all those who have died in Christ, and are blessed to have gone on to eternal joy with Him in Heaven.

It is therefore no surprise that the Gospel reading selected for All Saints Day is this one - the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes do a tremendous job of illustrating the distilled vision of Jesus' teaching on conduct, spirituality, and godliness; they are essentially a one paragraph instruction manual for how we can all become saints for Christ.

But the truth is, on a cursory read-through, this doesn't necessarily seem like a description of being blessed. In fact, a lot of this sounds like groups of people who have gotten the wrong end of the deal; we have those who are poor in spirit, those who are mourning, those who are meek, and those who are persecuted. It's enough to make somebody say "well, that sounds very nice, Jesus ... but I'm really trying to cut back on my mourning and persecution this month; do you have another options package I could choose from? One where being blessed makes you rich and well-liked and includes a nice

car, or a jet pack perhaps? No? Well, poor and persecuted and mourning it'll have to be, I suppose. The reason for this is that we often lose sight of what it means to be blessed. We say we're blessed with a nice job, blessed with nice car, or blessed with a big house. In recent years, the phrase "be blessed" has sometimes taken the place of "have a nice day"; and while owning a nice home or having a good day can certainly come with being blessed, they're simply not the same thing; we have conflated the two phrases. Blessedness is a much higher thing than happiness - happiness is predicated on circumstances and outside things. Blessedness is an internal state of being, and is the result of being in a right relationship with God. Blessedness is the understanding that our debt is paid by Christ, and blessedness is the understanding that we are to seek and do the will of God. Blessedness can't be taken away when the cable is out, the bank is empty, and the car needs four new tires. Blessedness, true blessedness, is permanent; happiness is transient at best.

The fact is, this is Jesus' desire for us - to be truly blessed; to revel in our salvation, and to understand our relationship with God. And God reaches us, and we reach out to God, when we are in these states of poverty. So the first thing He tells us is "*blessed are the poor in spirit.*" This doesn't sound very attractive to us, until we stop to think about

what being “poor in spirit” really means. Being *poor in spirit* means that we acknowledge that our only hope for spiritual purity and well being rests in God alone. When the tax collector beats his breast in Saint Luke and says “God be merciful to me a sinner,” he is poor in spirit; and Jesus tells us he went home justified, while the Pharisee did not. When King David says in the 51st Psalm, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me,*” he is poor in spirit. In both cases, these men acknowledge that they are not capable of cleansing their own sins, or of creating a clean heart properly oriented to God of their own accord; they acknowledge that these things absolutely require God’s aid, and so they cry out to God to assist them with their justification and sanctification, because they are insufficient to do so on their own.

This is where God meets us; this is where we encounter the holiness of God. The prideful and self-satisfied already have their reward; which sadly, is to view their inequity as virtue. The poor in spirit, who acknowledge that all good things flow from God, on the other hand, have their reward both in this life, and the life of the world to come. Jesus says “*theirs is the kingdom of God,*” not “*theirs will eventually be the kingdom of God.*” - it’s a present-tense statement. The poor in spirit, who receive God as father and Christ as redeemer, are already experiencing the kingdom of God now - and will do so all the more so in the world to come. Jesus Himself even experienced being poor in spirit, when he wept in the garden, so He’s not asking us do something He hasn’t already done.

The same is true of course for those who mourn. As with those poor in spirit, those who mourn are not simply lifetime malcontents, or the Eeyores of the world. The tax collector again fits this mold, as he was mourning his sin when he beat his breast, just as King David was mourning his sin when he besought God to create in him a clean heart. Jesus Himself mourned the destruction of Israel in Luke, “*And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it.*” Those who mourn, mourn their own sin, and they mourn the sin of the world; they mourn on behalf of their neighbors out of Christian charity, they mourn because they see the world as it really is, and are not distracted by the shiny things put in front of us to draw our attention away from God.

Jesus says that those who mourn will be comforted; but He doesn’t simply mean a pat on the back and a “there, there.” Those who mourn will be comforted not only by consolation, but by strengthening as well. When we mourn our sin, we grow in spiritual character; when we mourn for our neighbors, we grow in empathy and grace and holiness. King David said it best: “*Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness.*”

Finally among the first three of the beatitudes is “*blessed are the meek.*” This was a very counter-culture idea in first century Judea. Meekness was not a virtue. Sure, it’s easy to say it’s not a virtue now, but it was even less a virtue then; everything was predicated on superiority. The Hebrews on both racial superiority and religious superiority. The Romans prided themselves on societal and military superiority, and the Greeks prided themselves on the educational and philosophical superiority. But nobody, *nobody* saw virtue in meekness and humility; superiority was everybody’s stock in trade. And Jesus just turned that upside down - He says in no uncertain terms that it will not be the mighty who find favor with God, it will indeed be the meek.

This certainly shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus, who was all the authority in the universe, says of Himself “*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” If God incarnate referring to Himself as a servant is not a model for meek, sacrificial behavior, I don’t know what is. Christ, who could call down a host of angels at whim, chose instead to go to Calvary, and suffer for the sins of the whole world. And in His meekness, the world was redeemed of its sin; meekness is not just a simple virtue, it is one of the greatest virtues ever displayed since God pinned the stars in the sky.

So, as we celebrate this All Saints’ Day, let’s remember that we’re not just celebrating the ancient saints. We’re celebrating our loved ones whose sin died with Christ, and who will rise with Christ. And, dare we be so bold, we are celebrating the fact that we were given a fairly simply instruction manual by Him on how we can join them. The being poor in spirit, and of mourning, and of being poor in spirit has called us to join Him, to exercise those virtues, and to be saints ourselves. *Amen*