All Saints’ Day 2020

Today we learn what a saint is. That makes today all by itself, a good day. The first thing that comes to mind about a saint is one who has done things that the average Christian has never done. While it is true that God has worked miracles through St. Peter and St. Paul that He has not done through you, and while we should be thankful for what God has accomplished through the apostles, there are no saints apart from sinners who stand cleansed before God through His Son Christ Jesus.

Saints are forgiven sinners. God’s delight is in His saints not because of what they have done, but to whom they belong. We belong to God through His Son.

That’s how God himself sees the saints of His church and as we see her in the description written for us by St. John in the first reading from Revelation 7. Pictured in heaven are ordinary people from all over the world, throughout all time, wearing white clothes, cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, standing before Him and the throne of His Father.

Saints are Sinners forgiven by Christ who are with Him, standing before the throne of God. Upon closer inspection we see what they are holding in their hands. Palm branches. Why palm branches? When so many grieving people eulogizing their dear ones, insist they are holding things like golf clubs, fishing rods, knitting needles and crochet hooks. Palm branches point to the victory Jesus won on the cross. Saints are holding them not doing their hobbies.

What a great reminder that our deepest felt grief or even our highest moment of rapture does not determine truth but what God says and what He has written for us. Christians have also fallen for the false hope of trusting in what saints have done instead of what Christ has done. The feeling goes that God must surely reward His saints for their works and so if anyone of them could put a good word in with Him for me, I may have a chance to get to heaven or else improve my life somehow.

This has led to praying to saints. It happens during grief and it is quite human of us that we talk to our loved ones who have died, but upon sober reflection, there is no guarantee that those prayers are heard. Why? St. John tells us that the saints in heaven are not listening to us or even looking at us, they are so overcome by being with Christ, they cannot take their eyes away from Him and they are crying out with a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb! All in their own native languages!

Christ hears their prayers and ours. Through Him alone, we have a place to stand before His father’s throne and we have a voice that is heard and prayers that are always important to Him. As surely as Christ hears the prayers and praises of the saints in heaven, He hears ours because He sees His whole church at once.

There is only one church. Jesus only has one body. All saints are members of His one body. That is difficult for us to keep in focus because as the great hymn “For all the saints” says*, we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.* One church yet on earth she is in a battle with sin, the world and the devil. The same church in heaven is beyond all sin and death. We forget that because we can get stuck in this present world’s madness and so many evil attacks on the church. That can quickly lead to doubting God’s goodness and despairing of our own standing before God.

But the church of saints in heaven is called Triumphant. Saints in heaven have gained victory not by their perseverance but in Christ who died and rose for them and brings them through death to himself. Our eyes do wander away from him and our hearts do love this worldly pleasure and we struggle by confusing what God says and what our hearts say together with the world and the devil.

Martin Luther described saints on earth as both sinner and saint, at the same time. (*Simul Justus et Peccator*) The struggle with sin can confuse us and may overwhelm us and it can drive us into despair. We can fret knowing how sinful we are, that we could never reach sainthood. But God has forgiven your sins and does not see them for the sake of His Son, whose shed blood cleanses you from all sin. God sees Jesus when He looks at you.

This gives a clearer understanding of a saint: one who belongs to God.

St. John wrote in the second reading of this struggle yet can declare to the “**Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.**

We may look at ourselves and see nothing but weakness, shame and remorse. We may count how many of our family circle and our congregation are no longer with us. When we go to the cemetery what does it look like? It looks like death has won and our sin has defeated us.

Now hear what God says about you. You are my child. You are mine. Your sins are silenced by the death of my Son. He lives, risen from the dead and so shall you.

And there’s more. When you will see Christ Jesus, for the first time, with your own eyes, then you will be as he is. That doesn’t mean that we all become gods, but we will be beyond sinning, crying, mourning, hunger and thirst, and beyond sleep. Seeing Christ Jesus as his beloved church, we will know how much we are truly loved and prized by Him. Surely eternity is too short to give him thanks.

The gospel reading of our Lord’s sermon on the mount, compares our struggles in this life with the blessings of our heavenly life. The poor in spirit are the humble who have stopped running from their sin but realize within them is no good thing, yet in Christ Jesus they inherit the kingdom of heaven as God’s wonderful gift.

All mourning over our sin and the mourning over our dead, is turned to joy, comforted by being re-united in Christ Jesus.

Our present struggle with sin and longing to walk God’s ways on earth, will be fully satisfied in heaven.

Our hearts are pure not in and of themselves, but in Christ Jesus whose purity is promised to us. In Christ Jesus, we will see God face to face.

Our dead who have gone before us and those who are now facing persecution for his names’ sake, belong to heaven and all their suffering for Christ will be rewarded in heaven by praising God.

And so our present struggles, the world’s attacks on the church, and Satan’s deadliest lies that you are not worthy to be called a child of God are no match for the love that God has for us in Christ Jesus.

Our graves can no longer hold us down since Jesus lives and his beloved church in heaven and on earth lives in Him. See how blessed are all his saints, who are His!