

All Saints Day - November 1

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Opening Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, You were pleased to make Your Church illustrious through the varied splendor of the Saints. As we venerate their memory may we also follow such shining examples of virtue on earth and thus obtain merited crowns in heaven. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Introduction

The feast of All Saints began in the early centuries as a “catchall,” remembering martyrs whose names were not known and who therefore did not have their own festivities. It was introduced in Rome on May 13, 610 as the “Feast of All Holy Martyrs” by Pope Boniface IV. The occasion was a gift of the ancient pagan temple of the Pantheon to the Church by the Roman Emperor, Phocas. First celebrated on May 13, it was transferred to November 1 for the universal Church by Pope Gregory IV in 835. By then it included all the saints. The reason for the new date may have been a practical one. It seems that so many pilgrims came to Rome for the feast that it was moved to the fall when more food would be available after the harvest. The new date spread throughout the church. Its eve, All Hallows Eve or Halloween, gave its name to a pagan Celtic Druid custom still popularly observed on October 31.

1st Reading - Revelation 7:2-4,9-14

Revelation is the New Testament book of prophecy. Just as the Old Testament has books of Law, History, Wisdom, and Prophecy, so does the New. Revelation (Apocalypse) is one of the books which at one time were not accepted as sacred by all Christian communities. Its authenticity was suspect in parts of the Church, especially in the East. However, the earliest testimonies we have, which go back to the 2nd century are unanimous in their recognizing the apostle John as the author. The authenticity and canonicity of Revelation was pronounced by the Council of Hippo (393), Council of Carthage (397), and the Council of Toledo (633) initially, as the declaration of what books constitute the New Testament, and finally to quiet continued questioning. The authenticity remained undisputed from the 6th to the 16th centuries when Martin Luther initially argued against authenticity but later changed his view.

Written on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9) to which Tertullian, in his *Demurrer Against The Heretics* (~AD 200), tells us the apostle John was exiled "after being immersed in boiling oil and suffering no hurt". Many commentators place the date of composition in the 80s or 90s and tradition places the date as late as A.D. 95. I however, believe the date to be prior to A.D. 70 but this is not important.

² Then I [John] saw another angel

In the first verse, John saw four angels standing on the four corners of the world. The earth is perceived as a rectangular surface with favorable winds coming from the sides and unfavorable ones coming from the corners. The angels were holding back the unfavorable winds. The winds are released as agents of divine punishment (Jeremiah 49:36).

come up from the East,

This protecting angel appears from the direction of the rising sun, the source of light and the place of paradise (Genesis 2:8). God's actions in history traditionally came from the East (see Isaiah 41:1-4, 25; 46:11; Ezekiel 43:1-3). It was also from the east that the messiah was expected. This angel comes as the representative of Christ, the sun of righteousness who has risen with healing in His wings [Malachi 4:2 (Malachi 3:20 in the New American Bible)].

holding the seal of the living God.

According to the widespread custom of the ancients, oriental lords impressed the seal of their ring on their belongings. Whatever was so marked belonged to the lord and was under his protection (Ezekiel 9:4; Exodus 12:7-14). As we saw in Ezekiel 9, the angel makes the mark on the foreheads of those who have avoided idolatry; a mark which causes their lives to be spared. Whoever bears the "seal of the living God" will thus be His property and under His protection (2 Corinthians 1:22; Galatians 6:17; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; John 6:27).

He cried out in a loud voice to the four angels who were given power to damage the land and the sea,

Those in charge of the fury of the winds.

³ "Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees until we put the seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

The imagery which Saint John draws upon here is taken from Ezekiel 9:1-7. The seal of the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30) is applied to the righteous before the seals of wrath are applied to the wicked; Pentecost precedes Holocaust. The protective mark in Ezekiel 9 is literally *tav*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The ancient Hebrew form of the *tav* was +, a cross – a fact which was not lost on the early Church which saw it as a prophetic reference to the sign of the cross used by Christians. It is possible that the use of the sign of the cross in baptism may have originated in this passage.

⁴ I heard the number of those who had been marked with the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand

This is 12 x 12 x 1000. Twelve is a number of perfection in the physical and human world, governmental perfection. The second twelve corresponds to the 12 tribes of Israel. 1000 indicates a very large number. This is the ideal Israel, Israel as it was meant to be, in all its perfection, symmetry, and completeness. The 144,000 then symbolizes the multitude of the elect whose number is known to God alone.

marked from every tribe of the Israelites:

Not only Jewish Christians, but all members of the Church, the new (and true) Israel. The first group (the 144,000) come from the people of Israel. The second group, which we read about in verse 9, comes from all nations. Judaism cherished the hope (as we do today) that Israel would be restored with all its tribes in the Messianic times (Isaiah 49:6; Song 17:44). The first Christians asserted the fulfillment of this hope in Christ's Church (Matthew 19:8; Galatians 6:16; James 1:1).

⁹ After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue.

Obviously, more than 144,000 which could be counted. Probably an allusion to the countless descendants promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:5; Hebrews 11:12). The fact is that Jesus the Christ came to save the entire world (see [Isaiah 49:6](#)).

They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes

A symbol of baptism. They have been cleansed of sin and its effects.

and holding palm branches in their hands.

A sign of victory and of the thanksgiving of the elect (1 Maccabees 13:51; 2 Maccabees 10:7). The Jews celebrated the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) which commemorated the cleansing of the Temple by Judas Maccabaeus in 164/165 B.C. This celebration included the waving of palm branches because there was destroyed a great enemy out of Israel (1 Maccabees 13:51). Jesus attended this feast (John 10:22), and on Palm Sunday He imitated Judas Maccabaeus's action by cleansing the Temple of its defilement by the moneychangers (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). The word *phoinix*, translated as palm, occurs only two times in the New Testament – here, and in the story of Palm Sunday in the Gospel of John (12:13).

¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb."

The elect give thanks to God and to the Lamb (sacrificial meal) who saved them. They ascribe to God and to the Lamb what Rome claimed for the Caesars.

¹¹ All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures.

The whole court of heaven joins in the acclamation of the saints (Revelation 5:11).

They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God, ¹² and exclaimed: "Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

Placed at the beginning and end of seven terms (symbolizing heavenly perfection and covenant), the Amen frames the hymn and shows the full association of the angels with the elect. Official, public

worship in Scripture never shows the participants sitting at prayer; public prayer is always performed in the reverential positions of standing or bowing down.

¹³ Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, "Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "My lord, you are the one who knows." He said to me, "These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress;

The great tribulation. In union with Jesus, Christians regularly share trials. The great trial will mark the end (Daniel 12:1; Mark 13:19). The early Church did not expect to be miraculously preserved from all hardship in this life. They knew that they would be called upon to suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12) and tribulation (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Romans 5:3; 8:35; Revelation 1:9).

they have washed their robes

Many would consider them to be only the martyrs. It would be better to identify this crowd with the members of the Church who have remained faithful throughout the final crisis – the vision concerns the whole Church on earth.

and made them white

The white robe, symbolizing baptismal entry into the Church, can become stained through sin. The white robe holds for the earthly Christian a moral aspect (Revelation 3:4).

in the blood of the Lamb.

Reference to the Eucharistic liturgy (1 Corinthians 11:25).

2nd Reading - 1 John 3:1-3

According to tradition which goes back to the second century, St. John wrote his 3 letters in Ephesus, on his return from exile on Patmos, around the years A.D. 95-96. The authenticity of the 1st letter is well documented from early on. Detailed analysis of the text confirms that it was written by the same person who wrote the fourth gospel.

There are very obvious similarities of style, structure of phrases, vocabulary, and ideas. This 1st letter contains no special introduction, unlike the other New Testament epistles (except Hebrews). There is no mention of the writer's name or the addressees'. There are none of the usual opening greetings and no special words of farewell. This suggests that it is a kind of circular letter sent to all the Christian communities in the region.

According to a tradition passed down by St. Irenaeus (A.D. 180-199), the apostle John, on his return from exile on Patmos, spent the last years of his life in Ephesus. From there he ruled over the various churches of Asia Minor whose names are given in the book of Revelation (Revelation 2-3).

^{3:1} See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God.

"see what love" In the truest and most absolute sense, God's gift of love has been the gift of His only Son as savior of the world (John 3:16). It is this gift that has [1] Opened heaven for us; [2] Given us the sacrificial meal so we can eat of it and join in His family covenant.

"The grace of our Creator is so great that He has allowed us both to know Him and to love Him, and moreover, to love Him as children love a wonderful father. It would be no small thing if we were able to love God in the way that a servant loves his master or a worker his employer. But loving God as father is much greater still." [Saint Bede the Venerable (died A.D. 735), *On 1 John*]

Yet so we are.

Eating the sacrificial meal joins us with God in His covenant (Romans 8:12-17).

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

This relation to God is shown in the attitude of the world which gave the same treatment to the disciples as it did to Jesus. Also, failure to recognize the real presence in the Eucharist denies His power to bind us into His covenant.

² Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Two interpretations are possible, given that in Greek the verb has no subject: "when what we shall be is revealed we shall be as He is" or "when Christ is revealed we shall be like Him." The second is more likely.

³ Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure, as he is pure.

The seeing of God is what every Christian strives for but this vision is a hope, not a certainty. The reality of this hope is shown in the Christian life of virtue. By living the virtuous life, the Christian already begins to live the eternal life by imitating Him who is pure.

"Note that John uses the present tense when he talks about our need to purify ourselves. The practice of virtue is an ongoing thing and has its own inner dynamic. If we stop living this way or put it off until some future time, there is nothing virtuous about that at all." [Theophylact (died A.D. 1108), *Commentary on 1 John*]

Comment: Being "called by God", in the language of the Holy Scriptures, is not just the conferring of a title. When God gives a name to something, it in fact becomes what the name indicates:

Abraham = father of all nations

Peter = rock

The word of God is efficacious. It does what it says it will do. This is why Saint John says "yet so we are" – we are children of God.

Gospel - Matthew 5:1-12a

{Except for the Christmas Vigil and Ash Wednesday Masses, this is the only time we encounter the Gospel of Matthew during Cycles B and C; Cycle A having concentrated on this gospel.}

The name of the author does not appear in the text of this gospel. However, the constant tradition of the Church from the earliest times identifies the human author as the apostle St. Matthew, whom Jesus Himself called when he was working at his job of tax collector (publican).

Written testimonies going back as early as the beginning of the second century assure us that St. Matthew wrote down the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the "language of the Hebrews" (that would be either Hebrew or Aramaic; most likely the latter). The estimated date is around the year 50. There is no copy of the original text--only the Greek translation. When the translation was made is unknown but the most likely date is around A.D. 70.

Our reading for today comes from the Sermon on the Mount [Sermon on the Plain in the parallel gospel of Luke (6:20-23)] and is known as the beatitudes. A beatitude is defined as "a declaration of blessedness on the ground of some virtue or good fortune". I am always reminded of Fr. Ken Roberts' EWTN TV series "God Bless" where in the opening episode Fr. Roberts recounts the story of the young child who brought a sacramental to be blessed (a medal or some such item). Fr. Roberts asked the boy what it meant when it was blessed and the boy replied "It has been touched by God". Try reading the beatitudes while substituting "touched by God every time you encounter the word "blessed".

^{5:1} When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down,

This is the posture of oriental teachers.

his disciples came to him.

The teaching was not just to the twelve but in reaction to Jesus' seeing the crowds. Commentators have postulated that the crowd formed concentric rings around Jesus with the twelve making up the innermost ring.

² He began to teach them, saying: ³ "Blessed

To understand the meaning of blessing we must look to the Old Testament where it is conceived as a communication of life from God. With life comes vigor, strength, and success, which brings one peace of mind and peace with the world.

are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Emphasizes less the literal lack of possession than the lowly condition of the poor--they have no arrogance or assertiveness and instead are servile in nature. Christians are called to serve one another.

⁴ Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Those who mourn--they have compassion. This could mean those who mourn the evils of Israel which are due to its sins.

⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

These are the same class of people who are poor in spirit.

⁶ Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

The condition of good relations with God; achieved by submission to His will. The Pharisees thought that the condition of righteousness was assured by observance of the Law. Jesus insists that His disciples strive for something higher than this.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Those who are compassionate. The two works of mercy most emphasized by Matthew are almsgiving and forgiveness.

⁸ Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.

Pure of heart as opposed to external purity gained by ritual washings. Purity of heart is described in Matthew 15:10-20.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Those who reconcile quarrels. Reconciliation is a Christian office often recommended in the gospels (see Matthew 5:23-26).

¹⁰ Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Persecution for righteousness is persecution that is endured in order to maintain good relations with God by obedience to His will. Persecution is one of the rewards of discipleship (Mark 10:30).

¹¹ Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me.

There are only eight beatitudes -- this is an expansion of the previous verse.

^{12a} Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

Everlasting life in the kingdom of God.