

2024 B All Saints Day Nov. 01

Who, then are these robed in white, and where have they come from? What does it mean to be a saint?

Today we've heard the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' instructions for enabling us to recognize the saints when we hear or see them.

That sermon, sometimes treated as though it can be extracted from the Bible and read as a discrete set of laws, is not an optional extra. It's not "be baptized and then try to follow this rather than impossible set of rules." But it is a description of the church in the world.

Find yourselves among a group of people who shape their communities around the mourners, the merciful and the meek. The Sermon directs us straight to Christ. Unless we are conformed to Christ, we will struggle to hear it.

What I would like Jesus to say is "Blessed are the compromised", "Blessed are the messy" and "Blessed are the people who will struggle to make it through the day." But frustratingly, instead, we have "blessed are the meek."

So, what are we to do? Jesus doesn't address us in the Sermon as individuals. But speaks to us here at St. Philip/ Our Lady of Peace Church as a community. He tells us what we already know that we cannot exist without one another. We're not all expected to be meek, poor in spirit, persecuted or peacemakers, but if none of us are, then we're no longer the church, Jesus seems to say. These qualities can only be found in community.

One cannot try to be poor in spirit or to be meek. They are gifts that are to be found in followers of Christ, because Christ himself embodied them. And when we put on Christ, we will discover in our midst those who are pure in heart. We will glimpse a world that is turned upside down, and a church that contains some people who'd never be recognized as valuable by the world.

The Sermon on the Mount, then, is not a call for heroes in a culture that desires a quick fix. How we long for heroes to rescue us from the relentless news cycle of terrorism, famine, war, abuse and natural disasters. Heroes are solitary and often autonomous figures who can save the world only through their unique super-powers. They are watched and judged and cannot afford to make mistakes.

Saints, by contrast, always appear in the New Testament in plural. They've no need to be the "center of the story" because Christ plays that role. If the saint fails, then there is always the possibility of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Perhaps we'd prefer heroes and heroines and bravery and valor and conquest and victory. But saints know they cannot achieve salvation by their own efforts. But, I wonder,

when we discover the saints are, sometimes as imperfect as us. Are we disappointed? “If they can’t do it, how is there any hope for us?” we might ask. It’s tempting to airbrush the saints to a state of perfection, but that leads to idolatry. It is easy to idolize the people that we don’t have to live with, who don’t leave socks on the floor. Today, we observe the feast of All the Saints because under the Roman persecution of Diocletian, so many Christians were martyred that there weren’t enough days to observe each of them. Eventually, the day was expanded to include all saints, whether martyrs or not.

We invoke the prayers of the saints because the church is confident that they have attained fullness of vision in God. We recognize that some people made good in ways that most of us won’t. These people, we call, the Church Triumphant, but interestingly, they have always emerged from local congregations of Christians. Congregations, like this one St. Philip Benizi / Our Lady of Peace. Saints, then, are recognized, not created.

The Prayer Book reminds that the Catholic Church recognize the saints. Hear what Saint Paul says,” “Hear what Saint John says,” not because these people were sinless, but because their lives were especially oriented to Christ. So, we have the official saints, but can we call all Christians saints? We can, and we can describe ourselves as the Church Militant, not because we’re ferocious, but because we strive to follow Christ. The Church Militant is all of the baptized. It’s all of us who are in the process of becoming saints, for as John puts it, “we are God’s children now; what we will be, has not yet been revealed...” Being God’s children, we are friends of God. So, some are formally canonized, but some are not and are seen as the person in the pew over there or over there. And one is the person you know who called you to drive when you needed to go to the hospital. And another the person who listened on the other end of the phone when you needed help.

What makes a saint is not total freedom from sin, but a life lived in devotion to God. We are called to imitate their virtues. Christians can rejoice, for we are called to be saints. We know that life in Christ won’t always be easy, but it will be full of hope because we trust that Christ will guide us to the springs of eternal life where, eventually, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

“Who, then, are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” These are God’s people, the saints, whom Christ has called, through baptism, to participate in his life and feast at the divine banquet. They are us, and we have come from every tribe and tongue and nation to gather in his name.