

All Saints Sunday Year A
November 3, 2002
Running the race

Eccles. 44: 1-10, 13-14
Rev. 7:2-4, 9-17
Matthew 5: 1-12

Being Real

All Saints Sunday is set aside to celebrate “the communion of saints.” The communion of saints is a gathering of the saints here on earth, in communion with the saints in glory, who understand that we are the living evidence that Christ is risen. As the Medieval church added doctrine and structure, All Saints Day, November 1st gradually became a day to remember the martyrs favored by history. It took the creation of another feast, All Soul’s Day on November 2nd to observe the everyday saints who have no memorial, who have perished as though they have not lived, but were persons “of mercy whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.” Now as in much of our liturgical renewal of the past 50 years, we are reaching back to recover the customs of the early Christians and integrate these into the worship and traditions of the modern church.

All Saints Sunday is a celebration of all the saints - and especially the unknown Christians who live faithful lives serving God’s friends and our neighbors. These saints are not perfect nor have they died as martyrs for the faith. A saint simply means one who is set apart by Christian baptism. Look at the letters from St. Paul. He writes: to church at Corinth with all the saints in the whole of Achaia. To the Ephesians, the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus. To the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Phillipi. He is not writing to the martyrs. He is writing to the baptized, people like you and me.

In and through baptism, we are made saints, a word which means “set apart”. When we put on Christ in Baptism, we are blessed with all the benefits of Christ’s passion, blessings beyond what we could ever ask for or even imagine. And when we receive this sacrament through water and the Spirit, we join a host of other saints who stretch though time back to the days when the early church told eye witness stories of our Lord and Savior. We are gathered with all those who have gone before us and those yet to be. We, the saints of God, are gathered from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues...” and the examples of being pure in heart, humble, peacemakers, yearning for justice and patient in persecution are largely forgotten except by those whose lives they directly touch. A great cloud of witnesses, saints of God all around you and me all the time, the living and the dead.

On Friday, All Saint’s Day, I was in New York City visiting the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to take in a magnificent display of religious art from Medieval Spain which is entitled “Time to Hope.” This show was described by the New York Times as offering some of the most rapturous and wrenching religious art ever made. How glorious to wander through the exhibit which filled five chapels behind the Cathedral’s main altar, angels, martyrs, apostles, Mary at his birth,

Mary at his death and images carved and painted of Jesus's passion and death, those alone filling three of the chapels. It was spectacular and inspiring, and as the Times said, "all but unheralded, it seems to have dropped into place as an unbidden gift."

Interestingly, at the same time, runners were arriving through out the city to race in the New York Marathon which is always run on this Sunday and is going on as we gather here now. On this Sunday after All Saints Day, we hear in the Proper Preface, a prayer which captures my imagination as it sounds like it was written for the New York marathon and for the long run of the Christian life. "For in the multitude of your Saints, you have surrounded us with a great a cloud of witnesses, (imagine the runners lining up on the entrance to the Verazano bridge, surrounded by their coaches, friends and loved ones) "that we might rejoice in their fellowship," (runners tell of those who turn out to cheer them on, cheers which keep leaden legs turning through out the long race,) "so we may run with endurance the race that is set before us," (26 miles - and the rest of your life). It is a wonderful prayer. A wonderful image. A secret of strength and courage for those who keep on keeping on, and do so rejoicing.

This year, with the comments and responses of Bishop Smith fresh in our common memory, we would do well to cheer each other along the course we are charged with running faithfully. It is a time to run toward the same goal, to encourage one another and to run with endurance the race that is set before us.. This is not a sprint which only requires a quick burst of energy but a run of patient, well planned endurance toward our common goal : a Trinity church which will be here for many generations, fully equipped to share the love Christ with our local and world neighbors, a little more with every passing year.

It is into that companionship that we welcome the newly baptized today, not into a club of perfect runners, but into a community of those who will be there through out the marathon of their human experience, full of ineffable joys and wrenching sorrows. We promise to run with them. We promise to be with them , to cheer them on and most especially to be witnesses of the faith to them.

Frederich Buechner, "On All Saints Day: it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones, the despots and crackpots of our lives who, in one way or another have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to have of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own." (Listening to Your Life, p.290)
Amen.