

All Saints Day and All Souls Day

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; Matthew 5:1-12; I John 3:1-3

In the lectionary calendar, there is a trilogy of commemorations at the close of October and beginning of November. It is begun by All Hallows Eve (Halloween) on October 31, All Saints Day on November 1 and is concluded with All Souls Day on November 2.

All Saints Day is a feast day of great antiquity. References to such a feast are noted by St. Ephrem Syrus (who died in AD 373) in his papers and by the great preacher, Chrysostom (who died in 407). It received pontifical authorization by Pope Boniface IV on May 13, 609, and has been celebrated by all the church ever since. In the Western churches, it is celebrated on November 1 of each year, while in the Eastern churches, it is celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost. In churches that do not celebrate the daily hours, All Saints Day is observed on the first Sunday of November.

The purpose of All Saints Day is to honor all the Christian saints, known and unknown, who have been part of God's work through Christ upon the earth. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it, it is a day for celebrating all "the Saints, Martyrs and Doctors of the Church". It is followed by All Souls Day (November 2), in which the church commemorates all the souls of the faithful departed.

All Souls Day is of later derivation than is All Saints Day. The first recorded mention of it is in the writings of Odilo of Cluny, a Benedictine abbot and head of the 65 Cluniac houses of the Benedictines. In 998, he commanded its annual celebration throughout the Benedictine order. It was proclaimed a date for universal commemoration by the papacy in the 14th century. Its purpose was to commemorate all the souls of all the faithful departed, so that no one (who would otherwise be ignored by All Saints Day) would be excluded from veneration. And it was commemorated on the day following All Saints Day (Nov. 2, except when November 2 falls on a Sunday, and then it is commemorated on Nov. 3). Thus, with the inclusion of All Souls Day in this observance, the Church remembers all those in Christ who have gone before us, back to the Apostles themselves.

And what does Halloween have to do with all this? It is All Saints Day that gave rise to the celebration of Halloween or "All Hallows Eve" (All Saints Day was also called "All Hallows Day" or "All Hallowed Day" – that is, the day when all the "Hallowed" or saints were to be commemorated). In the medieval church, All Hallows Eve emerged from the mythology and storytelling of the people as the night that the ghosts of the dead prowled the earth, waiting to be honored on the next two days. This was never official teaching of the church (in fact, the church greatly discouraged it), but it rapidly caught on in popular culture. People envisioned that the dead walked about the earth as skeletons, ghosts or in their ancient clothes, knocking on people's doors and demanding treats or face the consequences. Most people huddled in fear in their homes, townspeople would set giant bonfires to both illuminate the town and drive away the evil spirits, and young pranksters would dress up in costumes both to scare people and to gather booty. Halloween was greatly feared by most medieval and Renaissance people, and they were relieved when the light of November 1 dawned and the feast day began!

Revelation 7:9-17 is a Christian psalm of praise. It appears in the book of Revelation. This hymn has three distinct emphases within it.

First, “I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (7:9). In the previous passage (7:1-8) it was stated that there were 144,000 who would be redeemed, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes. Now, the author is stating that there is to be “a great multitude that no one could count” who will embrace the gospel. In this way, John is proclaiming both limited and universal atonement. On the one hand, John is contending that all those who are to be redeemed are chosen by God (vss. 1-8), 144,000 in total, and all are Jews. On the other hand, he is further stating that there will actually be a great multitude beyond human capacity to count that will embrace Christ as savior and Lord, and that they will be “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”. The church will be a universal church, called out from every nation, every ethnic group, and every language in the world.

Thus, John is speaking an important word to the seven struggling churches in Turkey. He is saying, “You may feel like you are very little groups, small in number and struggling to survive. But you are only those leading the parade. Behind you is going to come a great multitude of people – 144,000 in number – no, even far greater than that because the Christian movement will become far greater than even 144,000. Eventually, there will be so many people that no one will be able to number them, and they will come out of every nation, every people and every language on the earth. This little struggling Christianity of which you are a part will someday become a universal faith spread throughout the whole world and will dominate the earth. It will far exceed in scope the Roman Empire, for it will be a faith for the whole world.” And, of course, John was right!

Second, the actual hymn of praise the gathered people raise to God and to Jesus is particularly noteworthy. “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb. Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen” (7:10, 12). This is a very profound and specific recognition being given to God the Creator and Redeemer (Father and Son), as you will see below.

What is particularly significant about this hymn of praise is that the writer of Revelation did not invent it. It was actually the established hymn sung to the Roman emperor, sort of like a national anthem! The term, “Savior” and the praise “salvation to the one seated on the throne” was a term reserved exclusively by Roman law for the Roman emperor. Further, this litany was the praise given to that emperor (normally, his name was inserted where “our God” is stated in verse 10). It was to the “genius” (the God-impregnated divinity) of the emperor that his court would declare, “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to (the emperor’s name) forever and ever”. This was how he would be greeted at every public gathering where he was present.

It is therefore intriguing that John uses exactly the titles given to the emperor and the recitation of these titles in the praise he reports that the church gives to God the Creator (Father) and Redeemer (Son). And that church is so vast in population that the court is filled with people as

far as the eye can see, a company far, far greater than any gathering staged for the honoring of the Roman emperor.

In other words, this passage is meant to embarrass the emperor and the Roman Empire! What John is boldly implying by using the Roman hymn of praise is that the emperor and his empire is “small potatoes” next to the power of God the Creator and Redeemer, for Jesus is the authentic emperor and his empire is of the entire world and not just of Rome!

Third, this hymn declares what God will do and God’s people will do to make possible this great empire (kingdom) of God. What God’s people will do is captured in 7:13-14: “Then one of the elders addressed me (the author), saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”.”

Rome won’t yield to the transformational power of Christ without a fight. And neither will any other political (nation, kingdom) nor economic (feudalism, capitalism, socialism) nor religious (the Jewish priesthood, the Roman religions, paganism) entity. None of the powers of the world is willing to share power with the King of kings. Each wants to totally dominate. But God will not have it so. These systems and any other systems created by humans will yield to the gospel and to Christ. It is inevitable.

But how will they yield? How will God’s kingdom be built? It will be built upon the *martyrs* of the church – not only they who give their actual lives for Christ, but also all those who refuse to compromise with the political, economic and values-creating systems of their own society, and who pay the price for that refusal to compromise. “The blood of the martyrs will be the seed of the church”. The subjects of Jesus will conquer Rome and every other system of the world. But they will conquer, not by being revolutionaries nor by using violence, but by love, by giving up the benefits of each society rather than to oppress the powerless and to exploit the poor, and even in some cases, by giving up their lives. The church will conquer the world and establish God’s kingdom by “having washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”.

But God’s people will be empowered to do what they are called by God to do because it is God the Creator and Redeemer who works through them and empowers them to do what they do. The transformation of the world into God’s kingdom will occur because of who God is and how God works in the world. The author sings:

“For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (vss. 15-17).

Working through God’s people, God will also work within them, making them impervious to the demands and pressures placed upon them to compromise. He will minister to them, sheltering, feeding and providing drink for them in the midst of the vicissitudes of life. God will not protect

them from either the evil consequences of the systems' policies or the inevitable pains of life. But God will enable them to conquer those evils and pains, and triumph over them. For God will "guide them to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes". So God's people doing God's work in God's timing will contribute to the inevitable coming of God's kingdom upon the earth, as history reaches its apex crying "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God and to the Lamb!"

Psalm 34:1-10, 22 is an acrostic (as is the entire psalm), with each verse beginning with the appropriate letter of the Hebrew alphabet (except *vav* that should follow verse 5). Traditionally, it is attributed to David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech (actually, King Achish – I Sam. 21:10-15) so that this Philistine king thought him mad and rather than imprisoning or killing him, let him go.

This psalm is essentially a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for God's rescue of the psalmist. It is divided into four parts. The first part – verses 1-10 – simply testifies to God's rescue of the psalmist, and therefore praising and thanking God. The second part – verse 11-12 (which is not included in today's reading) – is a wisdom reflection. The third section – verses 11-14 and also not included in today's reading – instructs the reader how living in awe, respect and fear of the Lord will lead to the doing of good, the departure of evil and the pursuing of peace – life as God intends life to be lived. The final section – verses 15-22 – presents God's reward of those who seek to live their lives in harmony with and working for the fulfilling of God's intentions for the world (vss. 15, 17-20, 22). It also deals with the fate of the "evildoer" – one who lives his life for his own purposes and ignores God's intentions for the world (vss. 16, 21).

This psalm is best known for its almost-proverb like statements that have become famous (and which are also very comforting for the reader). Here are some of the best-known:

- ? "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth" (vs. 1).
- ? "My soul makes its boast in the Lord; for the humble hear and be glad" (vs. 2).
- ? "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together" (vs. 3).
- ? "I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears" (vs. 4).
- ? "The poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord and was saved from every trouble" (vs. 6).
- ? "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him" (vs. 8).
- ? "The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" (vs. 10).
- ? "Depart from evil and do good; seek peace, and pursue it" (vs. 14).
- ? "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry" (vs. 15).
- ? "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (vs. 18).
- ? "He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken" (vs. 20).
- ? "The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned" (vs. 22).

Matthew 5:1-12 presents the well-known “Beatitudes” that open Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount – the principle statement of Jesus’ teachings found in the Gospel of Matthew. Although the word “beatitude” does not occur in the Bible, it is used by the church to refer to these blessings given by Jesus to the people. A beatitude is a literary form which starts with the word “blessed” and then presents a declaration of praise for an individual or group because of their meritorious action.

The nine beatitudes recorded by Matthew divide into three groupings.¹ The first four beatitudes deal with the poor, the “little people”, the “have nots” of Israelite society – the 10% to 12% who were the poorest of the poor. Those beatitudes are: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (5:3-6).

The next three beatitudes are the “haves” of Israelite society, those middle- and upper-class people who use their wealth and power for the advantage of the poor. They are: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (vv. 7-9).

The final two beatitudes are for the “hurt” people – those who, because of their commitment to God, God’s kingdom and to Jesus, are persecuted by those threatened by and opposed to a redistribution of wealth, power or control. They are: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (vv. 10-11). So the beatitudes deal with three types of people: the “have-nots”, the “haves”, and the “hurt”!

The final beatitude ends with the words, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (5:12). The ninth beatitude is not only the final of the beatitudes, but the summarizing beatitude. It seeks to gather all the beatitudes into one final blessing. Its objective is to bring all the other beatitudes home to each Christian so that each person realizes that these beatitudes deal with every one of us who name Jesus “Lord”. The lot of any who authentically follow the Christ is that they will stand over-against their culture, and because of that, each Christian will be reviled, persecuted, and lied about! It can be no other way. If you are authentically working as a change-agent in society for Christ and His Kingdom, you will be opposed by those seeking the status quo. There is no other way! But both in the living out of our faith and in its resulting rejection, we will find ourselves “blessed” by God, for we have pleased Him and have strengthened our life together with our brothers and sisters in Christ who share the same rejection.

¹ Traditional biblical interpretation divides the Beatitudes into two groups of four, with the emphasis on the first four beatitudes being about people in need and the last four being people in service. F. Dale Bruner presents the arguments for the two-part division, but also makes a strong case against this reading of scripture while championing the tri-part division I present above (*The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], pp. 155-156). I am indebted to Bruner for his creative work on the Beatitudes in his masterly *The Christbook* commentary on Matthew (pp. 154-194).

The nine beatitudes, considered together, have an intriguing flow to them. The first four beatitudes describe God's people as victims, as the "have nots" of our world. The people God particularly loves are those who are poor, broken-hearted and powerless. But they are also about to discover how God calls them to do all they can to lift themselves from such weakness and marginalization. Then, the next three beatitudes send such people out into the world to be Christ in the world today, acting in mercy, purity and in working for the peace (shalom) of the world. But the final two beatitudes then recite the inevitable result of such liberation from powerlessness and building themselves into a people of power, working for the transformation of the world. That inevitable result will be their rejection by the powerful, the secure and those who benefit from the powerful and secure. The "powers that be" and their people will become threatened by the work of liberation God's people are doing, so those powers will seek to do whatever they can to stop the redemption of the world. This they will do by first seeking to subvert the church (i.e., getting the church to accept the world's standards as its standards) and, failing that, will seek to persecute the church into submission.

But the message that Jesus would give to a church that has been lifted up by Christ, gone out to transform the world and has had to go down under persecution is, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you"! What was good for the prophets is good for God's people. So the blessings the prophets received from God for being prophets is the blessing that God's people will receive for working for God's new order in the midst of an evil world. We will be blessed by God, and thus live in "the joy of your Lord"!

(Note: a much more comprehensive study of the nine Matthean beatitudes is given in the gospel lesson for Cycle A Epiphanytide 4.)

I John 3:1-3 deals with what God has done for us Christians through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It begins with a most powerful metaphor.

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God – and that is what we are" (3:1)! We are "children" of God – not by dint of our creation as those made "in the image of God", but because of the redemptive work already done on our behalf at Calvary. It was the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus that atoned for our sin and complicity, and now makes us whole. That act of atonement was accomplished once and for all time – at the cross. Thus, it is at the cross that we are made children of God.

But not all embrace that salvific work of Christ. The world has not accepted God's love in Christ; hence, it does not "know"² God in a personal and dynamic way (cf. John 17:16). And

² It is important to remember that the Hebrew concept of knowledge was not comparable to our western understanding of knowledge. When we use the word "to know", we mean "to have accumulated sufficient data or information", whereas to the Hebrew, to "know" was to be in the most intense personal relationship with someone (thus, it was used to describe sexual intercourse, for example). A vestige of that insight still exists in modern English, when we talk about "knowing" someone – meaning that we have a personal acquaintanceship with them. But it is no way as intense a use of the word "to know" as it was both among the ancient Hebrews and the earliest Christians who filled the Greek word, *ginosko* with Hebrew content, so that they would use the word "to know" to

because they do not “know” God, they do not “know” or understand what kind of community we Christians actually are. Thus, they assign to our actions the kind of motives and priorities that would accompany their actions as people concerned only with building their own dominance, wealth and power.

But our intention as the community of faith is entirely different than the intentions of the world. Our desire is to be like Christ in our priorities, our actions and in our commitments. We want nothing more than to be “like him”, working in society “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to those in prison, to recover the sight of the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk. 4:18-19). Thus, we of the Church are called as “children of God” to be revolutionaries for Christ, bringing to society Jesus’ radical new way that builds God’s shalom community of justice, equity, elimination of poverty and dynamic relationship with God!

John then goes on to write the shocking words, “No one who abides in Christ sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous” (vss. 6-7). Does John mean what he says – that once you become a Christian, you no longer sin?

What John is presenting here is what was later formulated in the Reformed doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints”. That doctrine can be simply stated in four words: “Once saved, always saved!”

The sin to which John is referring here is the sin of apostasy. He doesn’t mean that Christians don’t have lapses from time-to-time and never act selfishly! What John is stating here is that once a person is embraced by Christ and embraces Christ (and, consequently, the Christ-life) he can never abandon the faith. And he cannot abandon the faith because God cannot abandon him! Once you have “known” God through Christ (think “sexual-intercourse”), you can’t “un-know” God (you can’t undo the act of intercourse, as if it never happened).

Putting it in terms of being “revolutionaries for Christ” (as developed above), what John is stating is that once you have committed yourself to Christ’s cause of building the shalom community, and have been claimed by Christ for that ministry, you can’t “un-do” it. You can’t reject that entire way of understanding and acting upon the world as God intended. *If you do reject it, that is an indication that you never accepted it in the first place – no matter how committed you seemed to be to it at the time!*

What John is teaching us in this passage is that if you have been chosen by God for Christ’s kingdom, and you have embraced that choice, you cannot later reject that call. You persevere as a “saint” of God, not because of your perseverance, but because of God’s perseverance with you! You can’t “unknow” him or his mission! You have joined his revolutionary force – and there’s no turning back!

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describe the depth of the existential relationship each Christian and the Christian community would have with Jesus and God.