

All Saints Sunday - Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, November 4, 2018,
Liturgical Year "B"

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 6:20-26, Revelation 7:9-17

"The Holy Ones"

You are going to hear the word 'saint' a lot today. After all it is All Saints Sunday. Our Hymns and our readings reflect that celebration. Have you ever thought what the term 'saint' means? Just who are these people? Roman Catholics believe that 'saints' are only named by the Pope in a process first called 'beatification' or being declared as 'holy' and then 'canonization' – or sainthood. In the New Testament the term used to reflect 'saints' is ἅγιος (hagios) – it simply means 'holy ones.' In the Acts of the Apostles, three of the four references to saints happen in chapter 9, verses 13,32,41 in which Ananias and then Peter talks of the saints as simply being believers in Christ. Paul speaks more of the saints in his Epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and Philemon. In each case, saints seem simply to be people who name Jesus as Lord. In the Book of Revelation, the word saints, occurs 13 times, which is more times than in any other single book, and the meaning is further defined. Saints not only name Jesus as Lord, but they are faithful and true witnesses for Jesus.

Let me ask you as question – did you have something better to do today, than come to church on a Sunday morning? Maybe you drove from Jacksonville, maybe you came from the beach, or maybe you came from someplace else? Did you have someplace better to be this morning? No, you know that family is here – and that doesn't mean blood – other than the Blood of Jesus, but you are here for a reason. We are all here for a reason. Jesus said, "you did not call me, but I called you." (John 15:16)

It is no wonder that the early church considered people who were martyred for their faith to be saints, and then soon these saints were bestowed special honor and then even worshipped by some. Unfortunately, I believe, the term 'saints' came to be applied to those special people - only.

But, I believe that there is Biblical evidence that the term '*saint*' is and should be referring to anyone who believes Jesus Christ as Lord. You know what that means? "Good morning, saints!" You are here for a reason today – again, Christ called you. To believe in Jesus demands obedience and following His will. A saint bears true and faithful witness to Christ in his or her speech, life-style and actions. To be a saint is when a believer seeks to let the Holy Spirit let us reflect Christ within us.

In today's reading from the Revelation of Our Lord Jesus Christ to John, by the way – it is singular – Revelation – not Revelations! John sees a vision of the saints of God, and this vision shows that the persecution is over for these believers, and God and the Lamb have already won the victory, the victory meaning that those who follow the Lamb are rescued from harm. The people who seek the Lamb's protection may well have to come through a time of great suffering, but they will find themselves in God's throne room, worshipping and serving God day and night with great, abundant and exuberant joy. This vision, occurs after John 'heard'

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the list of the 144,000 in verses 4–8. Don't sweat the 144,000. It is not a number that you need to know. What it means is that it is such a huge throng which nobody could ever count. They are clothed in white, symbolic for victory and purity, they are carrying palm branches as a further sign of victory celebration, and they can't hold back their enthusiasm: they are shouting out their joy and praise and thanks to God and the Lamb, because they have won the victory which has brought them their rescue. It is important to know that the word 'salvation' σωτηρία (sowteria) in verse 10, literally means 'rescue.' Think about that – Jesus as our Savior, has rescued us from ourselves, from our sins. Listen - *"And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."* It is God who rescues us! If you think for one minute that you can save yourself – then what are you doing here this morning? You can't save yourself. We have to realize that we ARE in need of a savior – we can't do it ourselves.

Very often in the Old Testament the word 'salvation' tends to mean 'the victory through which your rescue is won' and it would seem that is the case here. The shout of praise continues into Revelation chapter 7 verse 12, *"saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"* These 'saints' recognize with great joy that everything good, noble, powerful and wise comes from God Himself. This is the awesome acknowledgment that there is only one God, with the uninhibited shout of praise to the God from whom all blessings flow. One of my favorites psalms is Psalm 95 begins with *"Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation."* (Psalm 95:1) He is our rock, our strength, and the source of our rescue – our salvation – in short – He is our Savior!

John, is in the heavenly throne room, which he describes in verse 15 *"Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them."* – His tent is His tabernacle – meaning He has drawn them in as family and not strangers. There is a reference to this thing that people have to go through - a tribulation. Is life easy for you? Have you ever been through 'stuff?' Stuff that you think you can't handle alone? Stuff that is getting you to the end of your rope – a loss of someone? Or the birth of someone? It is a roller coaster! If that is not a tribulation – I don't know what is! The fact that you call Jesus Lord helps you through that tribulation – and one day you will be in His throne room – wearing the white that we heard about today. John is not simply looking on from a great distance like a fly-on-the-wall, but he is right there, with the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. And one of those elders speaks to him, asking him the question which we all want to ask. Who are these people?

The elder gives the answer – right away. They have come out of the great suffering. Some have been persecuted, as we prayed about this morning – the persecuted church. Has anyone ever asked you a question – why you are a Christian? Has anyone ever laughed at the fact that you are a Christian, or made fun of it? Have you ever watched the news today – in which Christians are made fun of? If that is not persecution – I don't know what is. They have lived through the

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nightmare and can now wake up to a glorious, fresh new morning. The reason their clothes are white is not because they necessarily lived perfect lives of total holiness and purity. Anyone here today fit that mold? I am not in that mold – every day I have to ask God's forgiveness. It is because the Blood of the Lamb, the sacrificial Passover-like death of Jesus himself, He has rescued them from the slavery of sin, making it possible for them to stand in the very presence of the holy and living God. You are able to receive the 'real presence of God' this morning – because you will ask for forgiveness and receive absolution – to be able to receive the presence of God in Holy Communion.

I want to suggest to you, from this, that there is no need for a 'holding cell' called by some 'purgatory' (which doesn't exist) – but that the death of Jesus, and their belief in Him is all that is required. It is called 'faith.' God will not only allow them and welcome them into His presence but He will 'shelter them with His presence' – in His tabernacle – His tent – just as He pitched His tent for the Israelites during their 'wilderness wanderings' on their way to the Land that He promised them through Abraham. All the blessings of the Jerusalem Temple, in other words, will be theirs, as John is given glimpses of the future, in all of the Book of Revelation, and he sees the vision of the New Jerusalem. God will protect them from the elements, and from hunger and thirst, and in a wonderful role reversal, the Lamb will turn into a shepherd, assuming the royal role of the Good Shepherd and the divine role of Psalm 23 leading His people to springs of living water.

An important image of the infinite love of God is that He Himself *'will wipe away every tear from their eyes'*. The character of Almighty God reveals an intimacy about that promise that I believe speaks volumes of the whole vision of Almighty God throughout all of Scripture. Yes, God is rightly angry with all those who deface His beautiful creation and make the lives of their fellow humanity miserable and wretched, but the reason He is angry is because, at His very heart, He is so full of mercy that His most characteristic action is to come down from His throne and, in person, wipe away every tear from every eye! I think learning to think of God in this way, when we hear the word 'God', instead of instantly thinking of an eternal being that is just waiting for us to mess up and do wrong – and to keep score. His mercy is everlasting and so is His Kingdom.

I want to close today with the words from today's Holy Gospel in which Jesus, the Lamb of God – Who sits on the throne, speaks of His believers, His sheep, as 'blessed,' as 'holy ones,' as 'saints' - *"Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets."* (Luke 6:20-23) That is the tribulation. We are in it – but there is a new day promised to each one of us – that Jesus Christ loves us enough to die for us – and to call us to Him. God bless you – holy ones!

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