

ALL SAINTS' DAY – 2021

- May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Look around you! Look! Look hard! You can't really see them with the eyes in your head, but they're all here—all those people who have loved and prayed you into faith and hope. And there are others, too, the saints who went before us in this place whom many of us—as latecomers—have never met. And there are those who loved your sisters and brothers in our community today, crowding in somewhere over this altar, within these walls and beyond. It is not just the immediate ones; these saints include our grandfathers' grandfathers and our grandmothers' grandmothers, and way beyond that so that we who preside at Eucharist again and again remember them. We proclaim with joy some version of "therefore we praise you, joining with the heavenly chorus, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all those in every generation who have looked to you in hope, to proclaim *with them* your glory, in their unending hymn." With that cloud of witnesses, we join in singing or saying the great hymn from scripture: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory."

We have a lot of other great music to celebrate the fullness of resurrection life, of Easter life, including such wonders as "The strife is over, the battle done, the victory of life is won." Many of them are incredibly grand and powerful and I wouldn't change them in the least. Yet today we are introducing an English hymn that is very new to us, a hymn that is very personal about our faith journey and the spiritual homes in which we make our journey. This hymn is most fitting for a funeral or a memorial service because it talks about people like us who grieve the loss of other people like us who have gone on to the larger life. Listen to the text of it:

In our day of thanksgiving one psalm let us offer for the saints who before us received the reward;

When the shadow of death fell upon them, we sorrowed but now we rejoice that they rest in the Lord.

In the morning of life, and at noon, and at evening, they were gathered to heav'n from our worship below;

But not till God's love, at the font and the altar, had clothed them with grace for the way they should go.

These stones that have echoed their praises are holy, and dear is the ground where their feet have once trod;

Yet here they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims, and still they were seeking the city of God.

Sing praise, then, and thanks that God's love here has found them, whose journey is ended, whose perils are past;

They believed in the light; and its glory is round them, where the clouds of earth's sorrow are lifted at last.

I suppose some might want to diminish this by calling it sentimental, but I find the insights into our faith journey tremendously profound. I have often thought about the walls of a church being well "prayed up" over the years by those prayers our spiritual siblings and forebears have offered when afraid, when seeking healing, when dying, when needing forgiveness, when confused, when broken-hearted, when healed, when a relationship has been restored, when a birth has happened or a love is being celebrated—all those many times we pray because at those times the only one we can address is God. That doesn't just happen in desperation; we cannot bear our greatest joys alone any more than we can bear alone our greatest fears or grief. And yes, we can share such

thoughts and feelings in a wooded glen, or on a path by a spring, or even on a mountaintop, for those places, too, are holy. But they are more likely to remind us how alone we are, whereas here and in other places like this church, we know that we are part of a greater community we cannot fully comprehend yet know it surrounds us with love, sustains us with love and fills us with hope.

I love this larger community—not just those who have died, for they are the easiest ones to love. It is the living community which challenges us to love, because they can be as difficult as some of our family. The departed no longer have attitudes, tones of voice, a sense of superiority over us. The departed no longer remind us of something we did that we would like to forget. The departed know that they cannot be any more beloved than they now know they are, and they no longer have a need to put anyone else down. That blessed state of peacefulness, that inner concord and harmony is what the cloud of witnesses brings to every Eucharist we celebrate with them. They share their blessedness from the next life and invite us to taste of it now, to let it into our lives, by letting go of our resentments, by making amends for the brokenness in us that has harmed others, and by preparing ourselves for the more wondrous gifts to come.

We Anglicans, especially we whose primary language is English, don't quite know what to do with the two feasts that come back-to-back in our calendar, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. Spanish-speaking Christians have got another perspective: sure, on All Saints' Day celebrate the great saints of the past: Francis, Theresa, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mary and Mary Magdalene, Paul and the other apostles, you know what I mean. Each and all of you could pick favorites on any such list. But November 2nd is El Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, when we pray for those who may be forgotten, like my neighbor up the street who died last week, like my grandmother, even like my

nasty cousin. They pray for them all. There is some playfulness in that, for they are represented by skeletons, and this is a household celebration, where each family makes an altar and adorns it with the macabre and the sublime, with the stuff of their lives. These shrines are visited by good friends, neighbors and the extended family, since many of their relatives will be remembered there. If you are ever invited to such a gathering, don't miss the opportunity to attend an intensely personal event that goes back and forth from the tears of missing to the joy of resurrected life. [In that brief description, I hope I have given you something close to the meaning of this day in others' spiritual lives. We can learn so much from people whose customs go beyond ours.]

My heart goes out to each and all of you who have lost someone you love this year. May this liturgy help you to continue to work through your grief and help you to move further into thanksgiving and joy.

Amen.

+JJJ