

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ
Septuagesima Sundayⁱⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-ninth Verse of the second Chapter of the First Book of the Maccabees.^{iv}

“... Now when the time drew near that Mattathias [**matt-uh-THIGH-uss**] should die, he said unto his sons, Now hath pride and rebuke gotten strength, and the time of destruction, and the wrath of indignation: Now therefore, my sons, be ye zealous for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of your fathers. Call to remembrance what acts our fathers did in their time; so shall ye receive great honour and an everlasting name. Was not Abraham found faithful in temptation, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness? Joseph in the time of his distress kept the commandment and was made lord of Egypt. Phinees^v [**FINN-ee-eze**] our father in being zealous and fervent obtained the covenant of an everlasting priesthood. Jesus^{vi} for fulfilling the word was made a judge in Israel. Caleb for bearing witness before the congregation received the heritage of the land. David for being merciful possessed the throne of an everlasting kingdom. Elias^{vii} for being zealous and fervent for the law was taken up into heaven. Ananias^{viii} [**ann-uh-NYE-uss**], Azarias^{ix} [**azz-uh-RYE-uss**], and Misael^x [**MISS-ay-ull**], by believing were saved out of the flame. Daniel for his innocence was delivered from the mouth of lions. And thus consider ye throughout all ages, that none that put their trust in him shall be overcome. Fear not then the words of a sinful man: for his glory shall be dung and worms. To day he shall be lifted up and to morrow he shall not be found, because he is returned into his dust, and his thought is come to nothing. Wherefore, ye my sons, be valiant and shew yourselves men in the behalf of the law; for by it shall ye obtain glory.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the sixth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.^{xi}

“... But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: Which in his times he shall shew [SHOW], who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen. Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.”^{xii} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

I recall my very first solar eclipse, probably about 1961 or 1962, when I could not have been more than four years old. I remember it well. My mother was very careful to tell me not to look directly at the sun, because it was very possible that I could go blind if I did. During a solar eclipse, we can look at the sun, not realizing that the infrared rays are every bit as destructive to the optic nerve as ever. Our eyes cannot take those rays in their full strength. So, I was told not to look up when the sky would darken, but to look down and so preserve my eyesight.

A cousin, who lived across the street, came over with a cardboard box, that, if worn like a helmet over the head, due to a hole cut in the

back and a white sheet of paper as a viewing screen placed in front, could be used to see the reflection of the eclipse. It was a partial eclipse, and I recall that on the white screen I saw the sun with a dark round shadow in front of it, causing the reflection of the sun to appear like the moon, when it is only partly visible. The sun appeared shaped like a quarter moon, reflected inside the box-helmet. Even more strange, when I removed the box from my head, on the ground a thousand such reflections appeared, little quarter-moon images of the sun. We could not look directly at the brightness of the sun with any safety, but we could look at the endless reflections all over the ground. I have never seen that particular effect from an eclipse on any other occasion in about fifty years since that day. But I cannot forget what it looked like.

That is an illustration for us. In our condition as fallen creatures, subject in this world to sin and death, we cannot not look upon the undiluted glory of God in its perfection. It is not a danger, because it cannot happen; for if it happened we would be unable to endure it. It is true that Christ said, "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father." But this was accomplished by His coming to us as a man. Even on the Mount of Transfiguration it was His glorified humanity that shined with the brightness of the sun in its strength. He made known His divine presence by everything He said and did, especially by defeating death when in His resurrection He ushered in immortality. But never did He unleash on anyone a perfect glimpse of His divine nature, for to do so would not have been merciful, but rather terrifying. So, He took human nature in its fullness, and this became a part of Him forever by a loving and gracious act of His will. Human nature served as His icon, a perfect image of the Father for us to see. Similarly, His Presence here today is very real, but made food for us under "these shadows mean" of bread and wine.

We do hope to see God some day, and not only in the human nature taken by the Son, though never will it be set aside; And whenever we see God we cannot do so without seeing Christ Jesus, for the Trinity cannot be divided or dissected. The goal and hope of Christians is to see God as our Lord Jesus said: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." This one little line is the reason why this passage that opens the Sermon on the Mount is the Gospel for the Feast of all Saints. The Church long has used the word "saints" to speak of those we believe

to have entered already into the perfect state that allows them to be granted the *Beatific Vision*. That is, to see God as God, the final perfect destiny of the human creature by grace.

Because we are not ready for the Beatific Vision, we must, for now, see God the way I saw the sun during the solar eclipse in my childhood. What we see, that is the sight of God in Jesus Christ, is real. And, real also is what you see when I hold the Sacrament up and tell you to Behold the Lamb of God. We see that reality in a way that is given to us by God's love, because He saves us by showing Himself. Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”^{xiii}

We see Him in His human nature, lifted up on the cross. We see Him as the Lamb of God, ourselves not worthy that he should come under our roof, but asking that He speak the word only, and our souls shall be healed. Yes, what we see is real. And what we see is granted to us in a way that saves us rather than destroys us, for He came to save us. Our sinfulness, our weakness and our foolishness is all taken into account by the Father, and what we do not see is due to His mercy. The fullness of Godhead dwells in Christ bodily, and the Holy Spirit is really and truly present within the Church—within us with all His gifts. But our destiny is to behold the sun in its strength when our eyes are made able to endure the brightness, able to endure seeing God as God. We are meant to know Him as He is, to behold throughout eternity the Beatific Vision, a vision not stagnant because He is infinite, and our knowledge of Him once made perfect will be ever perfected more and more, endless knowledge, joy and love.

Yet we must never presume on God's grace. Hell is the eternal denial of this joy; not that God denies it to us, but that we deny it to ourselves if we do not make it our aim to know Him.

Think of the words we call the Summary of the Law. The first and great commandment is the impossible call to be saints, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind, and then to love your neighbor as yourself. When you look at the Epistles of Saint Paul, in the opening of the Epistle to the Romans and the first Epistle to the Corinthians, you see that all of the people who belong to the Church are “called to be saints.”

I like the King James Bible, with that accurate translation “called to be saints.” That “called to be” part is missing from the understanding of a good many Protestant revivalists, fundamentalists and Pentecostals. They teach that every Christian is a saint just by, as they like to say, “accepting Jesus.” Meanwhile, the opposite error belongs to those who seem to think of saints as if they were comic book superheroes, people with special abilities like Superman born on Krypton, or Spiderman with his radioactive bug bite that enables him to do amazing things. We mere mortals cannot be like them, and it’s best just to be normal.

Well, the truth is that a saint is a holy person. That is what the word means. And, the truth is that everyone who belongs to Christ has the vocation to be a saint. We have not yet arrived at being perfected as saints, but neither are we supposed to leave that to a special class of superheroes. Scripture commands us to “follow on to know the Lord.”^{xiv}

This is shown by the Feast on our calendar that is devoted to All Saints. The most important thing that we Anglicans focus on that day is not the issue of devotions to the saints. Sure, it is possible, I suppose, to slip into idolatry and to worship saints and angels—and some people have. But, that is not a likely error for most Anglicans. I think we all know that only God is to be worshiped as God. The ancient practice of asking the saints to pray for us is not idolatry, and should not be condemned as if it were. I can make no guarantee that they have a more than merely human capacity to hear everyone, for that would indicate that they somehow shared the Divine attribute of omnipresence (which they simply cannot). I cannot place my faith in any one of them that way. Bu, I know that they must be praying for the Church militant. For they have been made perfect in charity.

Again, the subject of devotions to saints is not our focus on that Feast of All Saints. Our focus then has always been the call that God has given to all of us, the call to become, by grace, saints ourselves. That is, we are called to be holy, to be faithful in every area of our lives, to press on to know the Lord, to confess the sins we fall into and repent of them in order to be forgiven, and also to be cleansed and delivered from the power of sin. We are called to develop the Christian virtues, faith, hope, charity, and the Cardinal virtues, fortitude, justice, prudence and temperance. Above all of the others, charity, the bond of perfection.

In order to begin to answer the call to holiness, we must be thankful. And, that is the best reason to look at the Lord Jesus as the Lamb of God, lifted up on the cross as Moses lifted the serpent on the pole in the wilderness. It is in thanksgiving that our hearts begin to render for Christ's great act of love, that our souls are healed, not treating us as our sins deserve, but rather dying as our atonement. In that love we begin to see the reflection of Divine glory. Like that reflection I saw as a child, wearing a box as a helmet on my head, we see the glory of God the way I saw a projection of the sun. And like the innumerable reflections of the partial sun that I saw across the ground, we see radiant glory in the great company of saints who have gone before, and who now, with hearts made pure by grace, behold the glory of God.

—oo0oo—

The Rev'd Robert Hart^{xv}
November 1, 2011

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Mass on All Saints' Day, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{iv} *I Maccabees 2:49-64 (KJV).*

^v *I.e., Phinehas.*

^{vi} *I.e., Joshua.*

^{vii} *I.e., Elijah.*

^{viii} *I.e., Hananiah.*

^{ix} *I.e., Azariah.*

^x *I.e., Mishael.*

^{xi} *I Timothy 6:11-19 (KJV).*

^{xii} *Matthew 5:8 (KJV).*

^{xiii} *John 3:15-17 (KJV).*

^{xiv} *Hosea 6:3 (KJV).*

^{xv} *Rector, St. Benedict's Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.*