

SERMON FOR LAYREADERS

ALL SAINTS' DAY

Brian McKee¹

First Lesson:²

Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.³

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure is taken for misery, And their going from us to be utter destruction: but they are in peace. For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded: for God proved them, and found them worthy for himself. As gold in the furnace hath he tried them, and received them as a burnt offering. And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble. They shall judge the nations, and have dominion over the people, and their Lord shall reign for ever. They that put their trust in him shall understand the truth: and such as be faithful in love shall abide with him: for grace and mercy is to his saints, and he hath care for his elect.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:

Here beginneth the nineteenth Chapter of the Revelation of St. John the Divine.⁴

“And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great

whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever. And the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia. And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God. And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

“Happy the souls to Jesus joined,
And saved by grace alone;
Walking in all His ways, they find
Their heaven on earth begun.”

In his famous hymn, “For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” Charles Wesley summarized this concept this way: “anticipate your heaven below, and own that love is heaven.”

For both of the Wesley brothers, heaven was love and we can begin to experience that love here on earth. If we achieve the goal of loving God and loving our fellow human beings, that love will help find heaven for us -- both here and now and for all eternity.

Let us all strive to “go on to perfection”. Let us all strive to be saints!

Let us pray:

Almighty God, with whom dwell all the saints, and who holds all creation in Thy hands; guide us through Thy grace, and help us to utilize the manifold means of grace with which Thou hast endowed us. Lead us on to perfection, holiness, and sanctification, that we may, at last, truly become Thy saints, in glory everlasting. Through Jesus Christ our Blessed Lord, Our One and True Paschal Lamb. *Amen.*

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² *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928/1943).

³ Wisdom 3:1-9 (KJV).

⁴ Revelation 19:1-16 (KJV).

⁵ Revelation 19:9 (KJV).

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And [the Angel] saith unto me, Write: Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.”⁵

Homily:

“To render thanks to God for the lives and deaths of the saints is to recognize the common bond between the church on earth and the church triumphant in God’s love,” said The Rev. John Wesley, Anglican priest and theologian. The “common bond between the church on earth and the church triumphant” is summed up in a phrase we repeat each Sunday in the Apostles’ Creed: “the communion of saints.”

The “communion of saints” is a very important doctrine of the Church that is perhaps easy to skip over as we recite the Apostles’ Creed. The communion of saints includes all of the members of Christ’s Body, the Church, that is, those who are alive and members of the Church here on earth, as well as those who have gone before and are now with God. It includes all of the saints in the past, those who are working toward becoming saints now, and those who will become saints in the future.

When we gather at the Altar, the holy Table of God, for the Eucharist, we celebrate that Eucharist not just with those who are physically present in the Nave of our parish church but, indeed, we participate in that Eucharist with all the saints who have gone before.

Though we may not see them with our physical eyes, they, too, are present and joining with us at God’s Table. They are the great cloud of witnesses by which, the author of Hebrews tells us, we are compassed about.

The Eucharist is the “marriage supper of the Lamb” and all of us are called and invited to attend. All of us are called to receive the Eucharist as members of the Church here on earth and we are invited to join in the Eucharist, in the future, as being among the saints who have gone before.

We may say “Who, me? a saint? I’m not worthy to be called a saint.” Indeed none of us, on his own, is worthy of his own salvation. It is only by the prevenient grace of God that any of us can hope for eternal life. Likewise, it is through the prevenient grace of God that one may aspire to be a saint. God calls each of us to be a saint. This is why the Holy Day we celebrate today is called “The Feast of All Saints”; it reminds us that all members of the Church are all called to be saints.

The way to become a saint – “going on to perfection”, as the Rev. John Wesley called it -- is best understood as one of repentance, as we believers on earth turn our backs on the sinful nature that remains in our hearts after Baptism. Wesley called this left-over sin nature “residual sin”.

Works suitable for repentance, beyond keeping God’s laws – works such as self-denial, taking up one’s cross daily -- include the instituted means of grace: daily prayer, reading the Bible, receiving the Eucharist, fasting, and, when necessary, auricular confession to a priest. Beyond this, works of mercy are also a means of grace by which we can “go on to perfection”.

Such means of grace would include things like visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining and giving hospitality to the stranger, and teaching those who have not heard, and responded to, the Gospel story about the love of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial and atoning death on the Cross.

To these means of grace, we may add the wisdom gained through reason and good judgement. Such wisdom teaches us to avoid whatever weakens our sense of God or causes our conscience to be hardened to the point that we can no longer discern what is sin. We need our conscience and we need it to be tender for it to guide us to the ways of perfection.

“Going on to perfection”, holiness, sanctification (a term Wesley appropriated from the Eastern Orthodox fathers of the Church), having the “mind of Christ”, are all things that we cannot achieve on our own. Nor can an agent of the Church give these things to us.

We can gain these things and grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God, through Christ our intermediary and intercessor who ultimately reveals to us the heart and mind of God. All of our works toward holiness and “going on to perfection” should be founded in Christ, should be derived from Christ, should allow us to grow in Christ, and should lead to Christ. Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is the ultimate Way in which Christ reveals Himself to us.

To Anglicans, heaven is more than where God is enthroned, Jesus abides, or where the children of God -- the Body of Christ -- will spend eternity. Heaven is also a kingdom for here and now. The Rev. John Wesley wrote: “It is called the ‘kingdom of heaven’ because it is, in a degree, heaven opened in the soul.” Heaven, in addition to being the eternal home of souls where God is enthroned, is a spiritual state where we try to do the will of God. It is a spiritual state where we “go on to perfection” and strive to become saints.

The Rev. Charles Wesley, Anglican priest and brother of John Wesley, echoes this in a verse of one of his many beloved hymns: