

Sermon – Christ Church, Garden City

All Saints Day

“To the church of God that is in Garden City, to those that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

So may the apostle Paul have written to this church, Christ Church in Garden City, New York. Paul understood that those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus are saints, and worthy to be remembered as such. Paul was writing to the people of the church of Corinth but he could have been very well writing to you today.

Today is the feast of All Saints, a day when we remember and celebrate all the saints who through the ages have taken to heart their baptismal vows and lived lives worthy of the promises of Christ. Today also we especially welcome Drew Elianna Colon as a new saint into the body of Christ. It is through our baptism that we are sanctified in Christ Jesus and sealed with the Holy Spirit. It is through baptism that we start the journey to become what we are, as Paul implied.

The journey of Jesus as told to us through the gospel according to Matthew begins with his own baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptizer. The Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove and God’s voice is heard declaring his pleasure at what has transpired. Immediately Jesus is led into the desert where he is tempted to deviate from his life’s course and become someone other than the person God had intended. At each of the tests Jesus stands firm and repudiates the efforts of the evil one to tempt him away.

Surviving the temptations Jesus then calls his disciples who leave their own lives to follow him. It is at this point that we pick up the story of their journey as Jesus leads them to a place where he can teach them about the life they are called to live, the life that will enable them to become what they are to be, to become what God intended for them. In Jesus’ first sermon he teaches them about life through what we call the Beatitudes, our gospel reading for today.

Our lives are journeys from birth to death. Sometimes a life is extraordinarily short and sometimes remarkably long. No matter what length a life is Jesus calls us to live it in a way that is true and blessed. To understand the word ‘blessing’ that is used in these teachings we can turn to the translation offered of the Hebrew word for ‘happy or blessed’ found in the opening sentence of Psalm 1. *Ashar* is best translated as *to find the right road*. Our life’s journey is to find the right road. For Christians it starts with our baptism.

The Beatitudes are intended as a guide to life and each consists of a blessing and a promise. If we said of the first, “you are on the right road when you are poor in spirit” we would understand that Jesus was pointing to our humility in our spiritual development. For us to recognize that we are poor in spirit means that we see a constant need to find

ways to grow our spirit and faith. It helps mitigate what otherwise might be a state of arrogance thinking we don't need to do this work because we know it all and are already virtuous. Each blessing can be understood in this way and we can measure our life against them. Are we on the right road?

The second part of each beatitude is a promise of Jesus. The second beatitude talks of comfort for our mourning. If we care deeply about our family and friends, indeed all those around us, we would treat them all with love and respect as fellow created beings in God's image. We would then mourn or grieve for them if any harm comes to them. If we care so much as to mourn we will find comfort in Jesus reassurances. For not to see others as equal to us, and not to care if others suffer, leaves us callous and indifferent and other than Jesus Christ. We would deviate from the right road.

The beatitudes are an invitation to walk with Jesus through our life's journey, to learn and discover truth as Jesus lays it out, and to follow the right road.

Our discipleship, our responding to the call of Jesus and our baptism into the body of Christ reminds us of the journey of faithfulness that is life as God intended. When Jesus calls us to this journey we join a long line of all those that have gone before and those who are our contemporary companions on the way.

The Feast of All Saints is a time in our liturgical calendar when we pause to reflect on what sainthood looks like in the light of these blessings and all the saints that have made a difference to our lives. We can reflect on our feelings stirred by these words of Jesus and the memories of the saints we know and the response that we feel called to make.

We are indeed called upon to meditate on these blessings and to make decisions about our lives. For Drew, her parents and godparents are accepting the responsibility to raise her in a way that equips her, when old enough, to contemplate these blessings for herself and make decisions about how she is to live her life. There are great discoveries to be had about life by making these blessings central to one's life journey.

Our history is full of saints that have followed the right road. Their life stories are often documented and upheld for us as examples of a virtuous life. Some have had their lives documented in ways that makes their discoveries and experiences accessible to us. Many more though are not widely known and have not had their lives documented. Their sacred stories are no less virtuous. For many of us we hold dear the memory of those people that shaped our lives of faith. Maybe a parent or grand parent, a priest or pastor, a trusted friend or companion.

For me many people have shaped my Christian life and all are saints, though not all are perfect. Each person was important at different times in my life. Some were only in my life for a few hours or days. I think of Reenie, a homeless women I met on the streets of Chelsea or Lyn, a transgender women I met when she was a patient at NYP Columbia. Others have been in my life for longer. I remember my parents who had me baptized and raised me in a Christ centered house, Prue an old friend from my church in Sydney and

Lorenzo a seminary classmate in ministry in Los Angeles. Each has encouraged me make a new discovery about God, my spiritual life and my understanding of Jesus.

We have to have open hearts to enable us to benefit from these blessings and promises of Jesus Christ. We have to be able to understand what we are experiencing as God's spirit seeks to shape our lives. Learning how to be open takes commitment and perseverance. Our spiritual openness comes through our desire for fellowship, for common worship and prayer, for a desire for spiritual formation and enquiry, and our willingness to share our experiences with others.

Most of us are well educated and conversant with the complex world in which we live. Many though are not conversant with the development of an inner spiritual life and what is going on in their hearts. It can be easy to shut down spiritual formation but when we do we will find life more difficult and we will find the distance lengthen between God and ourselves. Our spiritual lives will become dry and the discoveries of life will be more materialistic and less heartfelt. Being able to recognize when we are growing apart from God is the start of the journey back to God and the right road with Jesus. God always stands ready to welcome us back.

All of the saints that have gone before us have experienced going off the right road and being far from God. All have recognized their separation and folly and made the decision to turn back.

Drew is just starting her life and as we move to her baptism into the body of Christ and to seal her with the Holy Spirit of God, we pray for Drew and her parents and grandparents that her life may be a life lived on the right road. We pray that she may be raised to have an understanding of Jesus Christ, her spirit and her faith and to be open to the discoveries of a faithful life along the way and to become who God intends her to be.

So we give thanks this day for all the saints that have gone before us and those here with us this morning. Let us give thanks that a new saint will be baptized and start a new life in Christ today.

Amen