



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

All Saints' Day (A)
November 1, 2020

RCL: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Revelation 7:9-17

While it can be very easy for modern Christians to dismiss Revelation as an over-imaginative apocalyptic text, the pastoral implications of John's vision have great meaning for the Church of the 21st century. In its original context, the Revelation to John intended to offer a word of hope to a community experiencing the suffering and rigors of martyrdom, persecution, and internal conflict about belonging.

In particular, Revelation offers a perhaps surprising illustration of the population of God's kingdom. In today's reading, we hear that the courts of heaven will be filled by "a great multitude... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." To an early Christian community struggling with the question of Gentile inclusion in the Church, John's Revelation offers a clear answer: God's salvation is for *everyone*. And this salvation includes not only a promise of protection ("the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them") but also a promise of comfort: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

This year is marked by great suffering, tumult, and division, especially in the United States. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect our country, the death-dealing systems of racial inequality are more visible than ever, and this week's election threatens to polarize Americans beyond healing. To us, just as to the Christians of the early Church, this passage from Revelation is a much-needed reminder of the overarching plan God has for us.

- Who might you be excluding from your community, as some early Christians excluded Gentiles? How will you make manifest the vision of inclusivity we hear in today's reading?
- What sorrow or grief are you carrying these days? How can the promise that God will wipe away every tear comfort you or others you know this week?

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

One of my favorite hymns as a child was "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," which we only sang once a year for All Saints' Day. As a child, this hymn offered a way for me to begin to imagine the kind of person who might be a saint: patient, brave, true. In the song, the saints mentioned are ordinary people with ordinary jobs seeking to make the world better – using who they were, wherever they found themselves. Above all, the hymn makes it clear that saints are *faithful*.

Today's psalm is a similar musing on the same ideal! This psalm is attributed to David, a deeply human, flawed, striving leader. In it, we hear the full truth of what human relationship with God can look like: full of praise and exultation, attention oriented toward the Lord—and we hear, too, that God responds to this kind of adoration, offering refuge and deliverance. In this way, I suspect we learn an ancient truth: that our very humanity is saintly when we use it to glorify the Lord and draw this world closer to God's own kingdom. The very ordinary stuff of human life can be made holy and redeemed when we use all we've got to adore the God who created us. All God requires of God's saints is fidelity—faithfulness to the end.

- How might you practice fidelity in the ordinary workings of your life this week? What might it look like to be a truly human saint?

1 John 3:1-3

In the first lines of this short passage, we hear that we are children of God. This language implies a kind of adoption of humanity by God; through this adoption, we become full children of God, ontologically kin to the Divine (cf. John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002], p. 219).

And yet—this passage implies that our kinship to God is what we are *now*, and that what we are to become cannot yet be known. This strikes me as a message of deep hope for all those who live in a world that can seem broken and marred by sin. If this world as it is – and we in it – are *already* children of God, imagine the glory of what we might become when the human, limited world is cast away and the Kingdom of God is brought fully into reality. This is not a message of doom, but rather a reminder to strive toward the revelation of Godself in the hope that we indeed will be made pure.

- What does it mean to you to be a child of God today, in this world?

Matthew 5:1-12

It may come as a surprise that the text for All Saints' Day is the oft-quoted Beatitudes rather than a story about resurrection or heaven. However, in the context of the whole lectionary, the Beatitudes affirm the emphasis of today's readings on *what it looks like* to be a saint.

In these verses, Jesus clearly defines for those who listen the character of those who are blessed—the character of the saints. Rather than advocating for wealth or power, Jesus celebrates mercy, meekness, purity, peacefulness, and righteousness. Moreover, these characteristics are not simply static attributes of a single person but are instead calls to a particular kind of *action*. To truly inhabit blessedness, we are called to be merciful, to practice peacemaking, to protect those who are meek or hungry.

We must align these characteristics with how we behave because, as Jesus illustrates in his rhetoric here, the world is not yet as it should be. Jesus' emphasis on the future tense (“for they will be”) reminds us that

there is work to be done and that we have no small part in it. This is the activity of sainthood: to make the world better through compassion and caring for those around us.

- How can you inhabit the action of blessedness and sainthood in your own life this week?
- Who do you know who seems especially saintly in the way we talk about here? How might you emulate them in your own life?

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