

## **All Saint's, Parma, November 2, 2008, All Saint's Day, Year A**

This is a very important Sunday in the life of this parish, and I feel privileged to be here to celebrate with you. This is All Saint's Day, your patronal festival, when once a year the parish celebrates the saint it is named after. If this was St. Paul's, or St. Matthew's, or St. James Episcopal Church we would remember and celebrate the life and work of that particular saint. But guess what! You don't have just one saint to celebrate but every Christian saint that ever existed. Today we celebrate millions and millions of saints. We often think of saints as holy people who lived long ago in very different circumstances from our own who were holy people who were close to God.

This might be true for a St. Paul or a Saint Matthew, but we are remembering a different kind of saint. I'm talking about the saints with a small s and not a capitol S. I'm talking about saints that are just like you or me; Christians who followed Jesus as best they new how and have now gone before us into God's heavenly kingdom. But we are also celebrating ourselves, because we are saints as well. An English author of children's books has words in our hymnal that express this well: "They lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still, the world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will. You can meet them in school, or in lanes or at sea, in church, or in trains or on planes or at tea, for the saints of God are just folks like me." So when we pass the peace in a few minutes you will actually be a saint greeting another saint.

Today, however, we especially remember the saints that played such an important role in our lives who have died and now live with God. We will read their names with joyful hearts, remembering them as saints of God who were just like you or me. They may be gone, but they live on in our memories. Even though those we love have died, we are still in a mystical way connected to them. We know this from our own experience. A mother once told me of a child who had died as a teenager years before. "There is not a single day that passes that I don't think of her," she said, "and in a way, feel her present."

Our former presiding bishop Frank Griswold has written of how the communion of saints is strong bond that includes our loved ones, even though they have gone to the heavenly places. "My father," he says "was too ill to come to any of my ordinations, which was a great sadness for me. He died before my installation as presiding bishop and the night before my installation I had an extraordinary dream about him. In my dream he told me that he had been healed; that he was now well. He said, "Save me a seat next to your Mom." I awakened with a sense of peace and

of feeling very connected to my father . During the service I really did feel his presence, as if he was here with my mother, smiling on the marvelous events of the day.”

People have told me they have had similar experiences of hearing from departed loved ones in dreams. Dreams are, after all, how God often communicated to people in the Bible beginning with the patriarchs like Jacob. Joseph the father of Jesus was told by God in a dream that it was safe to leave Egypt with the baby Jesus and return home. My father died 20 years ago after several years of declining health. He had poor circulation and at one point had to have a leg amputated below the knee. Fifteen years later I was not thinking much about my father when he visited me in a dream. My memory of the dream is still vivid. In the dream he came to me in the present. He was not younger or older than when I last saw him, but he exuded health and wholeness; a restoration of the perfect self. I realized that this was his heavenly existence, and that he was still tied to me as part of the communion of saints. Some may argue that such dreams are wishful thinking, but those who have experienced them would disagree. These dreams feel as true as any other experience of reality. This connectedness with those who have gone before has always been a teaching of the church. It is expressed in today’s prayer of the day: “Almighty God, you have knit your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son.” Both the living and the dead who have died in Christ are part of the church, part of the body of Christ. All Saint’s day reminds of the connectedness to a great community of God’s people of every age and generation, in whom we are included as brothers and sisters.

The reading from Revelation gives an idea of what the saints who have gone before are experiencing. They are in the presence of God and Christ the Lamb. Hunger, thirst, and heat, symbols of all the pain and suffering that accompany human life are to be banished from the experience of the redeemed. “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more...for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Those who are gathered before the throne know no boundaries of race, culture , language or nationality. Everyone is represented before the throne. There are no outcasts. We see, by faith, the truth is that Christians in all places and all times have a common future. Death is not the end of life, either with one another or with God.

No one knows exactly what heaven is like for those loved ones we remember today, or eventually for ourselves. It won’t be exactly as John saw it in his vision, for death is a great mystery, and the life beyond the grave is a mystery as well. But is

not a mystery to them. It is a brilliant reality, joined lovingly to our duller and more painful world. Though they have moved from here to the larger life, we are still connected, joined in love through our common Lord.

In the beatitudes of today's gospel we hear words of hope to those who were not only there with Jesus at the time, but for us as well. And that is because he did not bless those that seemed on the surface to already be blessed: the wealthy, the joyous, the well fed and the powerful. These are texts that speak to us with words of encouragement and reassurance. They renew us with hope for the future.

Because Jesus speaks with authority as God's Son we know that we can trust in the promises. Especially appropriate for All Saint's Day are the words of Jesus:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." When we think of those we see no more the mood of celebration for this day is often tinged with grief. Familiar faces begin to appear—parents, spouses, sons, daughters—cherished individuals whose separation from us means deep pain and remorse. Death is part of what is wrong with the world, what Paul called the last enemy. The beatitudes offer a blessing to those of us who face All Saint' Day with mixed feelings, with grief as well as celebration. Yes, we mourn, but we will be comforted. Yes, we hunger and thirst for righteousness, but we will be filled, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

*Let us pray.* Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Grant that in our earthly pilgrimage we always be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer, and know ourselves to be surrounded by their witness to your power and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN