

All Saints  
November 1, 2020  
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“What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

A blessed All Saints to you! We don't venerate saints in the same way some of our Christian brethren do. Mostly, we don't pray *to* the saints, we don't ask them to intercede for us, like in the second line of the Hail Mary, “Pray for us sinners now and the hour of our death.” We don't do that, but we do venerate them. (And we can still use the Hail Mary, I do probably more than any other single prayer, I just advise not being too literalist about it).

Have any of you ever been to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles? It is the Roman cathedral, and not an uncontroversial one, both for its hyper-modern architecture and its \$97 million dollar price tag. I get it, but I tell you, it is one of the best religious spaces I have ever been in.

The starting point of the design of the cathedral was that the building and its major systems and furnishings were supposed to last for 500 years. I thought it was cool that Bell Labs built the old rotary phones to last for 40 years; think 500 years. Besides nuclear waste and microplastics, we don't do anything with an eye out 500 years out. Now that's some faith laid out in very concrete terms; literally concrete terms. It is made of poured concrete, and the overall form and color of the building is reminiscent of the old Spanish missions that have been built in the LA area since 1771. The building is just awesome, right down to the cathedra, the Archbishop's throne made of wood from all six continents where trees grow, representing the diverse communities within the Archdiocese.

The most stunning part of the building for me hangs along the walls of the sanctuary, a series of tapestries by the California artist John Nava, called “The Communion of Saints.” It consists of 25 tapestries, averaging 18 feet tall, which picture 135 saints and “blessed.” Each is labeled, and intermixed are children of various ages, representing the anonymous saints. Each figure is in period dress and even the background, it is fresco-like, and was made from scans of archeological digs on the actual Via Delarosa in Jerusalem. It is awesome.

The whole project was a cross of modernity and antiquity. The faces were digital photos of real people. Nava talked to friends about how they prayed, what posture they used. Folded hands. Kneeling. Hands out stretched, and that was how he placed the saints. All of these

elements were combined digitally, and emailed to special computerized looms in Bruges, Belgium, that then took two months to weave. It is all woven in cotton, because it lasts: we still have intact weaving from the time of Pharaoh.

That is all fascinating, but what matters in art is what art does to you. And sitting there in that massive concrete cathedral, you are surrounded by the communion of saints. You are part of the communion of saints. They are all around you, they are with you, you are with them, and if you follow their eyes, all 135 pairs of them, they all lead directly to the great cross-shaped window directly above the altar where Eucharist is celebrated. They point directly to where so many of us encounter God. Across time and space, from history and into the future, we are included in this movement to God. That is true, and this piece of art confirms that.

We have arrived at a moment in our nation, perhaps a precipice. Record fires are still raging in West, a record hurricane season impacted the Gulf coast again, daily we are hitting record numbers of COVID cases, and an election looms, superlative in its contentiousness, in how many votes have already been cast, and the fact that our President continues to threaten to not recognize the outcome. We are in a moment of anxiety, fear, anger, delusion, confusion... damage, it seems, is being done to the fabric of our democracy.

I have been thinking about the saints recently. Extraordinary people arise in extraordinary times. Again and again and again, in the worst of human times, some people rise up to the call of God and live as if... as if we could, in fact, “taste and see that the Lord is good...”; as if God loved us as much as we are promised; as if the Commonwealth of God were right here in front of us like Jesus tells us over and over again, if that is, we lived as if that were true.

The New Testament was written in tumultuous times, all of it was written either directly preceding or following Rome’s crackdown in 66 CE and the destruction of the temple. Desolating sacrilege was in the air at its writing. The faith of the evangelists and apostles who gave us God’s word wove the trauma of their times into the fabric of our faith. With that trauma, though, are memories of survival, stories of resistance, knowledge of resilience, encouragement to endure.

John wrote his letters late in the first century, the temple was gone, Judaism as it was known was ruined, this new church of Christ was reeling because Jesus had not yet returned, division was increasing, people were being persecuted, martyred, and horribly. And what does he write? “See what love the Father has given us...” Imagine that being on your lips as the world collapses around you. Imagine feeling that right now. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be

called the children of God; and that is what we are.” They were facing destruction, death, bad deaths, and what he proclaims is God’s love.

This coming week might be ok. Lord have mercy, I hope so. All these fears, these worst case scenarios, apocalyptic predictions might come to nothing. But they might. This could be a very long week, a long month. We might get a handle on this pandemic, maybe a vaccine or effective treatment will be discovered and maybe more people will sacrifice for others and wear masks, avoid gathering, close businesses and the rest. Or maybe it will explode into exponential growth like Dr. Shah warned of on Wednesday. No one knows, and yet... here we are. We gotta live.

John didn’t know what was going to happen in his world. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.”

The saints across the ages, facing the stake, the gallows, the mob, the plague, whatever enemy they confronted, they didn’t know what was going to happen to them, the people they loved, their communities, nation, the world: they did not know. But they did know precisely what John meant when he wrote, “What we do know is this: we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

Our future is unknown. Always is and always will be. But our future being unknown does not mean that it is not secure. Our future is secure, “we will be like him (he is talking about Jesus Christ)... we will be like him for we will see him as he is.”

One of the commentators I reference says it well: “...Christians in all times and place have a common future. They share the conviction that death is not the end of their life with one another or with God. Somehow, in ways not at all understood or even glimpsed in the present, they belong to one another even beyond death.”

John is telling us that we, the faithful, have a common future. We are bound together, the past and the present, those known to us and those we’ll never know, saints and sinners alike, we are bound together by and in and with the love of God. And yes, that means that we will be together on the other side of the grave. John doesn’t speculate on the details of our reward in the world to come. (Truly, don’t worry about that, it’ll be ok). What he is saying is that in knowing the love of God in which we live and move and have our being, our future is secure. Not known, not predictable, likely not even pleasant, but drenched in love flowing from the foundation of the universe directly into your fragile, often broken, hopefully open heart.

Does mom kissing the boo-boo cure the scraped knee? No, but it sure makes the pain go away so you can get up and at it again. It is exactly the same with God. Does having faith mean

terrible things won't happen? Does it mean that democracies don't descend into chaos, that violence won't happen, that you won't suffer? No, but it connects us indelibly to saints from every age who have suffered, too. And with them we are connected to God. And if God is with us, who can be against us? (Well, everyone, but with God, odds don't matter).

We are studying and praying on the sin of racism in the Sacred Ground class. In one of the films, a woman spoke of her forbearer's experience of the middle passage. What she saw in the stories of her ancestors, the horrors that were inflicted upon them, was that she was descended from rugged people, people who survived the unimaginable, the all but unsurvivable. Her ancestors were tough, tough people. Does that make the injury caused to black people now any less awful? No, but that connection can make it more survivable. That is similar to the story of Judaism, bearing the suffering of the world as the cost of being God's chosen people. Does that make the horrors Jews have and do suffer any less horrible? No, but those connections, that history, that common experience of the love of God has carried their nation through desolation after desolation after desolation.

We are bound together in the love of God in Christ. One to another. Now and to our ancestors. From our ancestors to a future that we don't know the details of, but can rest blessedly assured that God's love holds us like warm familiar arms, like a hen tenderly gathers her chicks, like a cool breeze on a summer day, the warmth of the hearth on a winter night, the laugh of a child, the touch of your beloved... We, you, are secure in your future: God loves you. Full Stop. (Isn't that what everyone says now)?

This existential, ontological security does not mean that you can just sit back because you've got yours, either because you are comfortable and safe as it is or because you are sure of your reward in heaven. No, no, no, that is a first order heresy. Jesus Christ was incarnate because things were not OK here. He came to secure a common future for God's people. What having a common future secured means is that you can risk everything on behalf of others right now, because in the cosmic scheme of things you know that you have nothing to lose.

We are called to risk our well-being for the good of others. That was the ministry of Jesus Christ that we are called to emulate. That is the legacy of prophets, apostles and martyrs, saints in every age. That is the Christian vocation we received in baptism, to make the Commonwealth of God real by any and every means we have. God willing it won't come to it, but mass marches like the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Arab Spring across the Muslim world, the crowds flocking to the Kremlin when Boris Yeltsin climbed up on that tank, that might be what it takes for truth and

justice to prevail if the sanctity of the election is subverted. Maybe you can march; maybe you cannot. If you can't, maybe you could materially support those who do, or by calling and writing those in power. Maybe you can practice assuming that most people's intentions are good, or simply not making snap judgements about anyone. Maybe you can repair a relationship that politics has compromised. Goodness we need good will right now. Or fill your larder and take good care of yourself so there is one less person to worry about as the pandemic deepens. Maybe right now all you can do is to stay at home and not spread COVID-19. If that is all you can do, that is much more than far too many are doing. And regardless of anything else you do, you can pray. I ask you to pray. I have heard from a few folks that have kept up on their 10 minutes of prayer a day homework from a few weeks ago. Keep it up! Prayer changes the world in many ways, not least through how it changes the one doing the praying. Pray.

The communion of saints we celebrate today reminds us that we are bound together in the love of God, and in that love our future is secure, so secure that we can take the risks that need to be taken right now. And if our salvation history teaches us anything, it teaches that risks need to be taken. As Jesus taught, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." AMEN.