

Year B, All Saints (Transferred)  
October 31, 2021  
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. It is actually tomorrow, the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, but the church makes allowances for it to be transferred to the nearest Sunday. It is a Solemnity, the highest order of Feast in our calendar, right there with Christmas and Easter and Epiphany. Its roots are in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and it where it began as a common commemoration of martyrs. (The martyrs were piling up, so they consolidated the memorials), and now it is a time to remember the saints across history and in our own lives.

Anyone have favorite saint? What’s their story? \_\_\_\_\_

A favorite of mine has always been St. Perpetua and her companions. She was a young widow of Carthage in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The Emperor Septimus Severus ordered everyone to make sacrifices to his divine nature. A Christian could not make such sacrifices (that was the point of the decree), and all who refused were arrested.

Perpetua, with her two slaves and two others young Carthaginians who were preparing for Baptism were among the persecuted.

Held in horrid conditions, Perpetua had a visions that were recorded in a prison diary, and gives some of the earliest accounts of women in the church. She wrote, “And I awoke, understanding that I should fight, not with beasts, but with the Devil...” Encouraging each other, they were thrown into the arena and were set upon by a leopard, a boar, a bear and a savage cow. She cried “Stand fast in your faith and love one another. And do not let what we suffer be a stumbling block to you.” I’ll skip the

final gory details, which are terrible, but her hagiography ends, “Perhaps so great a woman, feared by the unclean spirit, could not have been killed unless she so willed it.”

Another saint whose memory helps me came 1300 years later in Fugglestone, England. Any guesses? The Reverend Mr. George Herbert. He isn’t a canonized saint, as Anglicans don’t have a canonization process, but he and many others are recognized in our calendar by decree of the Church and their feasts are observed identically to the saints we share with our Roman and Orthodox brothers and sisters. The Church commemorates George Herbert, priest and poet, author of many works, including my favorite, *The Country Parson, His Character and Rule of Holy Life*, which still holds vocational water for clergy. His dedication to his book of poetry, *The Temple*, reads,

“Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;  
Yet not mine, neither: for from thee they came,  
And must return. Accept of them and me,  
And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name.

Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain:  
Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain.”

Another inspiration is The Reverend Absalom Jones, born a slave in 1746 Delaware. He strove and bought first his wife’s, then his own freedom. Educated in a Quaker school in Philadelphia, in 1787 he helped to organize the Free African Society, the first organized African-American organization in the nation. It eventually built a church which was accepted into the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania as St. Thomas African Episcopal Church. One year later, Absalom Jones was ordained deacon, and a few years later, priest, the first African American priest. Under his leadership St. Thomas grew to over 500 members in its first year. The Reverend Mr. Jones was an

earnest preacher, with a fervent abolitionist message about a God who always acted on “behalf of the oppressed and distressed.”

Our calendar commemorates John Muir, John Calvin, Catherine of Sienna, theologian Evelyn Underhill, J.S. Bach, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury and father of the modern eco-theology movement (whose feast is Saturday). Even Clive Staples Lewis (C.S. to most of us) has his day in the sun in November. I hope Aslan approves.

Our book of saints is now called *Holy Women, Holy Men* (it used to be called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*). Its frontpiece, is an excerpt from a 12<sup>th</sup> century Latin hymn. It goes:

Blessed feasts of blessed martyrs,  
Holy women, holy men,  
With affection's recollections  
Greet we your return again.  
Worthy deeds they wrought, and wonders,  
Worthy of the Name they bore;  
We, with meetest praise and sweetest,  
Honor them forever more.

So why are we talking about Saints? Why do we have an All Saint's day? We don't pray to them for intercession like in other traditions, and they are pretty exotic for those of us who grew up in churches further out on the reformed end of the spectrum. But we name churches after them. We commemorate them in our calendar. We have feasts like today. Why?

To be a saint, means to be an exemplar of Jesus Christ, of His Word and work in the world. We commemorate them, as our book of saints puts it, to “...give increased expression to the many and diverse ways in which Christ, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, has been present in the lives and men and women across the ages, just as

Christ continues to be present in our own day... these courageous souls bore witness to Christ's death-defying love, in service, in holiness of life and in challenge to existing practices and perspectives within both the church and society.”

Another way to put it is that the saints are those we recognize as having fulfilled their Christ-potential. They had the faith of Mary, Lazarus' sister written on the fleshy tablets of their hearts, and it found expression in myriad ways. The courage of Perpetua and her companions. The holy observation and careful poetics of Herbert. The grace and perseverance of Jones. The patience of Anthony of the Desert, the chutzpa of Anne Hutchinson, the selflessness of Jonathan Daniels, the insight of Teresa of Avila, the heart of Clare, and the forbearance of Francis. And those are just the names of saints remembered by history. Saints, anonymous saints, inhabit every clime and place, are in your lives, are in this room. Besides your mother, recall a saint in your life. Anyone want to share?

Jesus Christ calls us to be our best, to fulfill our Christ-potential. And each of our bests is specific, as specific as the bests of the saints recognized across the millenia. What the common of saints holds in common is that each and every one of them, the commemorated and the anonymous cross the ages, has at their core the desire, the willingness to sacrifice. Saints, in myriad ways, lean in to Christian perfection. They have the knowledge, faith and hope that in fact God will wipe away every tear, that “death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

This doesn't mean that we won't feel pain, that we won't mourn and cry and rend our clothes; this does not mean that we won't die... we'll experience all of these things, and more, but we won't be paralyzed with fear of dying, fear of suffering, fear of things being as they actually are. Knowing that you will face suffering and disappointment, that all of our journeys end in the grave AND doing what you can to

make this moment holy, to do what you know you are supposed to do, what is right to do and kind and forgiving... that is the Christian perfection of the saints of the ages, and that call is made to you, too.

We, you, all of us are called to Sainthood. Like George Herbert prayed, “And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name.” We are all called to strive, to live fully into what we know to be right. And in this world, as these stories across the ages teach us, living fully into what we know to be right calls forth martyrs; calls forth courageous thinkers and writers; calls forth selfless servants, generous patrons, maybe even an occasional brave AND good leader of the body politic (well, we can hope). Or less dramatically, but the substance of which makes for a Godly world, are the day in, day out micro-kindnesses we are all invited to. Holding a door for someone. Not being impatient with the lady who can’t find her check book in the grocery line or your good-for-nothing brother in law. Smilingly kindly at the person who annoys you the most (they probably need a smile).

I’m not there; not most of the time. I’ve got my moments, as you surely do, moments when the very best shines through. But like probably most of you, I kind of bee-bop through life most of the time, keeping my head above the choppy waters of life, distracted by the chances and changes we face each with each breath we take, constantly forgetting God’s eternal changelessness.

Now there is no easy path. No simple formula or recipe at [allsaints.com](http://allsaints.com) to set us on a God-ward course; cheap grace won’t get us there, there is always a cost to true discipleship. But we have the power to pay the cost, we do. You do. We have it, in our hearts and minds and bodies and spirits the ability to create what is helpful and beautiful, to bear suffering on behalf of others, we have the ability, by the grace of God, to love. We can, you can love as wildly as Francis, as deeply as Aquinas, as

courageously as Romero, as generously as Day. We have the means to be the people God made us to be, people capable of fulfilling the potential of Jesus Christ.

How? Ain't that the question. I don't have the answer, but it is there: in our Holy Scripture. It is right here: at this table we are about to gather around, in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood attended to by us, this great cloud of witnesses. It is in the check you write that keeps the power on so that the good work of this place in this hard time can continue. It is in the person sitting next to you, it is in the space between you and them. Your potential is so much more than you can know. "See, I am making all things new." Including you. AMEN