

All Saints 2022

Each year, I begin the homily on All Saints Day with a little history.

As a friend of mine in seminary used to say, I know you know, but it's good to review.

Admittedly, my motivation is, in part, my continued desire to reclaim the much maligned holiday of Halloween as a sacred day.

All Saints Day sits in the middle of three consecutive holy days, Halloween (also called All Hallow's Eve), All Saints Day, and All Souls Day.

Together, the three holy days form Allhallowtide, which falls in autumn.

These three days counterbalance the triduum of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil, which falls in spring.

In between come the Feast of the Nativity, or Christmas close to the winter solstice, and the Feast of St. John the Baptist close to the summer solstice.

John's birth, in other words, is celebrated just as the days begin to shorten; Christ's birth is celebrated just as they begin to lengthen, thus John wains as Christ waxes.

(Much thought went into the Christian calendar.)

Now, at the beginning of the darker half of the year, it is natural that we think of those who have died and celebrate Allhallowtide, whereas at the beginning of the lighter half of the year, we think of resurrection and celebrate Easter (with apologies to the southern hemisphere, of course).

The organizing of the Christian calendar according to the natural cycle is not merely an attempt to be clever.

It is not, in other words, merely an appeal to our intellect.

It helps us to experience that we are meaningfully connected to the world around us, to *feel* and not just to know that we are more than random bits of carbon that happened to develop self-awareness.

It serves to remind us that God is in all that exists—time, space, light, matter—that everything is profoundly connected so that the effects of all we do ripple out into the creation in ways that we cannot see or perhaps imagine.

We can create positive ripples or negative ripples.

We can problem solve, or we can complain and feel sorry for ourselves.

We can acknowledge people or we can ignore people.

We can build up or we can tear down.

One reason we experience a heightened sense of connectedness at the various holidays is because we participate in the cycle of nature through these celebrations.

If you do not believe me, imagine having Christmas during the long days of summer, as in Australia, or Allhallowtide's focus on death in spring when daffodils are blooming.

On this day, we read the sermon on the plain, Luke's less famous cousin of the sermon on the mount in Matthew.

In it, we hear that those who are poor and hungry, those who weep, those who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed are blessed.

This may sound strange.

I hear people say, "We are so blessed," and they usually mean they have health and wealth, implying that God has especially favored them.

Surely, when we ask God to bless us, we do not mean for God to make us reviled or poor.

The problem here is the familiar issue of translation.

When we read the word "blessed," we think of God granting a favor or request.

The Greek word that Luke uses, on the other hand, is μακάριος, an adjective that means happy.

Luke is saying that one who is poor or hungry or reviled on account of following Jesus need not be despondent.

We do not measure spiritual success by worldly achievement.

The preacher with the biggest jet, in other words, is not necessarily the most spiritually advanced.

Jesus is assuring those gathered that, though they may be frustrated by the injustice and inequities of the world, they need not worry that they are spiritual failures.

As for our internal lives, the more seriously we take our relationship with God, the more we tend to struggle.

It takes more energy to concern oneself with the whole of creation than it does to concern oneself with only oneself.

It takes more energy to face oneself and to build trust with others than it takes to make excuses to protect oneself.

I am reminded of the Simpson's episode in which film critic Jay Sherman asks actor Rainier Wolfcastle, "How do you sleep at night?!" and Wolfcastle replies, "On top of a pile of money with many beautiful ladies."¹

It is easy when all we care about is ourselves, easy, but empty.

Jesus, in Luke's gospel, is telling the people on the plane that those with earthly rewards are not necessarily favored by God.

Those who revel in their relationship with God, regardless of their worldly achievements, can be joyful, μακάριος.

Theirs is the *kingdom of God*.

Unlike Matthew's sermon on the mount, Luke had a more urban sensibility that causes him to include some woes.

The word οὐαί translated here as woe means something like *alas*.

1 *The Simpsons*, S06E18.

“Alas, for you who are rich, you are receiving your comfort.”

This, too, does not imply that God has abandoned them, but that those who see their comfort as assurance of their spiritual superiority are mistaken.

The two are unrelated.

We all need the gospel, even the wealthy Zacchaeus, as we saw.

Until we see others as God sees us, as people worthy of God, we have not grasped it, we have not entered the kingdom of heaven

On Halloween, I decorated and gave out candy.

I was disappointed that, compared with 2019, only about half the number of people came.

Still, I reveled in the the 30 children who did show up.

Someone in my neighborhood who was away on that day later asked derisively whether the children were “bussed in.”

Drawing on a word that has a long history in America, the neighbor implied that we were not neighbors to these children.

I wish I had thought to say, “I may not have been a neighbor to the children before, but now I am, because I treated them with dignity and gave them candy.”

How quickly we forget that Jesus said, “Let the children come to me,” and how he taught the lawyer that we are to reach out to others and be neighbors to them.

Or, we can stay trapped in our world of excuses and emptiness.

God does the loving thing and lets us choose.

Obviously, it takes a little more than a Snickers to build a relationship, but it is a start.

On Halloween, another person in my neighborhood (who is a member of St. James) sent

me a quote attributed to hymn composer and Methodist minister, Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

He wrote that “Halloween is A Day When We Get it Right./Strangers come to

us/beautiful, ugly, odd or scary,/and we accept them all/without

question,/compliment them,/treat them kindly,/and give them good things.”²

The gospel tells us that everything—time, space, light, matter, people—everything is

connected, and encourages us to be neighbors to those who were not previously

recognized as our neighbors.

Before Jesus addressed the people gathered on the plane, he was on a mountain praying.

Unlike Matthew, Luke has him come down from the mountain to the crowd in order to

speak with them on their level.

The word for crowd Luke uses, ὄχλος, moreover, implies something like “mob” or

“riffraff.”

Before Jesus speaks to the mob, he lifts his eyes up to them.

2 <https://nourishandnestle.com/news-from-the-nest-october-31/>

He sees them, the people others ignore, and through his actions and words, he reminds them that their lack of earthly reward in no way means that God does not love them or that they are somehow less accomplished spiritually.

He tells them that they are blessed for following the gospel and therefore need not worry about their relationship with God.

Through the list of blessings and woes, Jesus is telling us that we are not members of the kingdom of heaven until we realize, really understand in our depths, that everyone else is, too.

Until we love them as much as we love ourselves, until we act as neighbors to them, we are lost, divided, woeful no matter how much worldly success we have.

In God's eyes, we are all saints, but it is up to us to embrace that, to live out of that awareness.

If we are followers of the gospel, it is we who must take the first step.