

Date: November 4, 2007

SUNDAY: All Saints

SERMON: For Heaven's Sake!

Text(s): Daniel 7:1-18; Luke 6:20-32

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The Feast of All Saints is a gift to us from the tradition of the Church. Originally developed as a Christian counterpoint to the ancient Celtic celebration of *Samhain* at the end of the harvest, it was believed that the boundaries between the world of the dead and the world of the living grew very thin, and some actual crossing between those two worlds was possible. The Church reinterpreted or re-imagined that ancient festival by allowing the Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus to give it new dimensions of meaning.

By focusing on the Christian hope of the union of all those who are in Christ, both the dead and the living, All Saints gives us a chance to remember, not only those loved ones and friends who have finished their course in faith during the past year, as we will do this morning, but also to reflect on all those down through the ages whose lives have been, in the words of the old prayer book, "holy examples for us to follow." All of us, I'm certain have our own personal pantheon of saints whose examples of faith or courage or charity have had an impact on our own, either directly or through the inspiration they give us. I have told the story before, but it always bears repeating, of the Sunday School teacher who was giving her class a tour of the stained glass windows in the church, and identifying some of the saints depicted in the windows. At the end of the lesson, she asked, "Now who can tell me what we've learned about the saints?" One little girl spoke up and said, "Saints are people with light shining through them." That's just about right, I think, don't you?

Most of us probably didn't know a lot about St. Cyril before Ed Bradley brought him to life for us this morning during the children's time, but surely his is "a holy example for us to follow."

Cyril's concern for the poor mirrors Jesus' own concern for the poor that we hear in our Gospel lesson this morning, which is Luke's version of the Beatitudes. For Luke, it's not a spiritual poverty, but real, economic poverty he's talking about, as we see from his balancing of each beatitude with a corresponding "woe."

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your consolation. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled, but woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. . . I tell you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . ."

The counter-cultural flavor of Jesus' words is much harder to gloss over in Luke's version in these sayings. It's clear that for him, Jesus' message is a message that challenges and runs against the grain of the prevailing divisions and inequities in society. The life that Jesus pronounces "blessed," is a life that turns the value systems of the world on their heads. Love for enemies replaces revenge and violence; truthful speech replaces flattery; exploitation for profit replaces the divinity of the bottom line. It's little wonder that Jesus was crucified; such a vision of human society is either unintelligible or unacceptable to most people.

But there have been people throughout history who have taken that vision so to heart that they have actually lived it, and by their examples have taught us that it is possible to live it.

One that virtually the whole world is familiar with is Mother Teresa, who is often called "the saint of Calcutta" even though she has not yet been officially canonized by the Roman Church.

The main lines of Mother Teresa's story are widely-known: her going to India as a missionary school teacher with the Sisters of Loreto when she was a young woman; her quiet and, for the most part, unknown and invisible work for nearly twenty years before anyone outside her order and

her ecclesiastical superiors even heard of her; her founding in 1948, of the Missionaries of Charity, an order of nuns, devoted to working with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta— these parts of her story have been widely told ever since she was first introduced to the wider world in 1968 by the film and book by British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God*.

Much less well-known are the struggles she went through to get permission from the church hierarchy to follow her visionary sense of call to leave her order and found a new order of indigenous Indian nuns, who would model their lives on Jesus' concern for the poor, or the personal and private consequences of following that call for her own spiritual life.

Those parts of the story have now been told in the new book that came out just a couple of months ago, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta.'* You may have read or heard something of the flurry of attention in the popular media it has generated.

I found it fascinating how clearly she was able to ground her sense of calling both in her spiritual vision and in her practical establishing of specific goals and her display of administrative ability much like her 15th century namesake St. Teresa of Avila who was such a giant figure in the Spanish Reformation and the reform of monasticism in particular. At one point, like the good administrator he was, the archbishop asked her, "What are the means by which you desire to bring this about?" she replied *By going amongst the people—Nursing the sick in their homes—Helping the dying to make their peace with God, having little free schools in the slums for the little children— visiting the poor in the hospitals—and helping the beggars of the streets to live respectful lives.— In a word, to act the charity of Christ among the poorest— and so make them to know Him and want Him in their unhappy lives.* (p. 74) What a statement of what it means to live for heaven's sake! To act the

charity of Christ among the poorest— and so to make them to know Him and want Him in their unhappy lives.

It's not this visionary, yet grounded, sense of her vocation that drew the attention of the secular media. What the media flurry was about was the revelation in the book, mostly seen through her letters to her own personal confessor and spiritual director, Father Picachy, that despite her success in bringing her vision to reality, despite her world-wide renown, despite her obvious faithfulness to that calling, Mother Teresa labored through those long years in a profound sense of spiritual darkness, without any consoling sense of God's presence, or even of God's existence.

Passages like this one are frequent: "*Dear Father Picachy, How happy you are to be so much with Jesus— and so close to Him. I have been on the verge of saying—No. It has been so very hard. That terrible longing keeps growing, and I feel as if something will break in me one day— and then, that darkness, that loneliness, that feeling of terrible aloneness. Heaven from every side is closed. . . and yet, I long for God. I long to love God with every drop of life in me. . . with a deep personal love. I can't say I am distracted—my mind and heart is habitually with God. How this thing must sound foolish to you with its contradiction. . . I have nothing else to write— though I would have liked to write more— but nothing comes.*"

Atheists and secularists have had a field day, pointing to Mother Teresa's chronicles of her experience of God's absence, as actual evidence for the non-existence of God. Too bad for her that she just didn't admit it to herself and kept at that grim, depressing work with dying beggars on the street and abandoned children in the slums of Calcutta, deluding herself that she was doing it for Jesus, and all along not realizing that the whole enterprise was for nothing. All that devotion, all that commitment, all that spiritual angst— for what? She could have done

something much more rewarding, both financially and spiritually with her life. She was only wasting herself by living in such personal darkness of soul for so long. The *New York Times* even ran a blog about it on their website.

The critics don't get it. Such persistent and faithful following in the midst of existential darkness and doubt is incomprehensible, except to those who themselves have devoted themselves wholeheartedly to living for heaven's sake rather than for their own sake. From St. Paul onward to St. John of the Cross to Teresa of Avila to John Wesley to David Brainerd, the testimony to this sense of laboring on in the midst of spiritual darkness, doubt, depression, is a constantly recurring theme. These saints of all ages and walks of life have learned the truth of St. Paul's saying that "we walk by faith and not by sight." That's why Mother Teresa's life is "a holy example for us to follow," not that we all should go to Calcutta and minister to the dying poor as she did, but that all of us are challenged by her example to live out our own calling with the same faithfulness as she did, even when we do not have any sensible perception that God or anyone else knows or cares. If Mother Teresa's experience of darkness was more prolonged than most, it was perhaps, because her depth of identification with the sufferings of the world was much nearer God's own identification with the world's sufferings than most.

You see, in our self-centered, ego-driven, materialistically-consumed society, we have lost the language or even the categories of thought to make sense out of those who do not live their lives for their own sake, but for heaven's sake. Who needs heaven, when all our earthly desires can be so easily fulfilled, and when even our anxieties, both real and neurotic can be so easily managed with a little therapy, a few pills, a session at the yoga studio or a shopping trip to Boston for a new designer outfit or to Best Buy for a new iPod or video game to distract us?

It's so easy just to let the world of power

and money and sex appeal form our values and shape our lives, almost without conscious awareness. It demands remaining awake, paying very close attention; it demands time set aside to meditate and pray and "tune in" as it were to the values of heaven if we're to escape just drifting along, taking the most comfortable way or the way which guarantees us the most palpable inner sense of satisfaction and consolation.

Living for heaven's sake means living to the beat of a different drummer, marching to the rhythms of heaven rather than the rhythms of the world. In Jesus' description of the blessed life, there is an obvious disconnect between his notions of blessedness and the notions of most of the world. And the only the promise given is that by living such a life of contradiction to the normal values of the world, we will be rewarded by being called children of God.

In other words, we will have to live only by faith and hope, trusting where we cannot see, faithfully following the path along which we are being led, even when the very next step is not clear to us. This horizon of hope is what marks the difference between the saints and ordinary people. It's not their experience of some special sense of intimacy with God; it's being faithful to God even in the absence of any sensible or spiritual consolation. "*We are saved in hope,*" says St. Paul, and he was right. What he meant, I think, was that hope, rather than sight, is the Christian's mode of being, the manner of living. Hope always has an eye on the future, a future that we cannot see, beyond anything we can envision, a future that is not merely the result of human effort or ingenuity, but a future coming as a gift from God— nothing less than a new creation, that even now begins to be glimpsed through the shape of faithful lives, lived not for their own sakes, but for heaven's sake.

When a community of people visibly models such lives of mutual compassion, mutual love, non-violence, peacemaking, radical equality, abundant generosity, then those around

begin to see what may be possible for them as well. As Mother Teresa said it so simply, yet so clearly, “*to act the charity of Christ. . . so that others will know Him and want Him in their unhappy lives.*” Such simple saintliness, whether it takes us to the ghettos of Calcutta or merely to the coffee shops of Brunswick or the water coolers at our offices, is our calling, and the world’s only and ultimate hope.