

John 6 (2)

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Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] Amen. For the Lord takes pleasure in his people, he adorns the humble with salvation.

! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.! Amen. Well, a blessed feast of all saints to you, brothers and sisters.

Doesn't quite roll off the tongue like Merry Christmas, does it? So, what is all saints? Why do we celebrate it?

It's not something, of course, that all Christians observe. I know for me, growing up in a Christian tradition that was not Anglicanism, I'm not sure I'd ever heard of All Saints Day.

So, why do we as Anglicans commemorate it every year? I think to get to the core of that question, a little bit of a history lesson is in order.

[1:08] Don't be filled with dread, I'll make this short. The medieval church got to the place where they were celebrating two days, All Saints, followed by All Souls Day.

In the medieval period, All Saints Day was intended to celebrate the really holy, exemplary heroes of the faith, who we could be sure are in heaven.

And the medievals followed that by All Souls Day, which was focused on praying for everyone else, the ordinary Christians who had died and were now in purgatory.

Our Anglican forebears at the English Reformation retained All Saints Day. They did not really retain All Souls Day for a couple of reasons.

First, there was a renewed understanding that all believers are saints, both the exemplary saints that we know from history, but also the ordinary people who humbly follow Jesus.

[2:09] In addition, the Bible is clear that all of those who depart this life knowing Jesus and trusting in Him are now in heaven, and that is certainly something to celebrate, I would add.

So, what are we observing today? Why are we talking about the saints who have gone before us? There are a few reasons I want us to think about.

The first is that God is glorified in His saints. The second is that we belong to what the Creed calls the communion of saints.

And finally, I want to mention that we are called to follow the examples of those who came before us and who served Christ. Let's begin this morning with the first point.

God is glorified in His saints. That's certainly true of the exemplary saints from church history and from the Bible that we know about, but that's also true of those Christians that we don't remember.

[3:11] It's true of those believers who have known Jesus and who have personally impacted our lives. And of course, all of this applies to our calling to follow Christ, too.

As this morning's psalm says, The Lord takes pleasure in His people. He adorns the humble with salvation. The 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon used to describe Christians as trophies of God's grace.

It's a powerful thing to think about, isn't it? You and me, we are trophies of God's grace. As are all of the saints who went before us.

When we praise God for the examples of those who follow Jesus faithfully as His saints, we need to be clear, we're not really praising the people.

Because none of us are Christians because we're awesome people. Even the holiest of saints aren't saints because they're like some special class of superhero.

[4:22] Right? Not at all. We're praising God because Jesus can take and does take fallen, broken, rebellious people who are dead in their sins and do not know God.

Jesus takes people like that and washes away their sins with His very blood. God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the hearts of ordinary, flawed human beings and changes them from the inside out into people who live for God's glory by God's grace.

So if we and the saints are trophies of God's grace, it is not because we are awesome, but because God is awesome. It's not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done. It's because of Christ crucified and risen and the awesome power of the Holy Spirit. Our holiness is not found in our righteousness, but in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

None of this is because we have achieved righteousness of our own, but because we are clothed in His righteousness. Remembering the saints who have gone before us in our own calling to be saints leads us to remember the gospel that God saves sinners by His grace alone.

[5:50] Because if we are saints, if believers who have gone before us are saints, even the greatest of them, it's still all by God's grace in Jesus Christ.

And He can make a saint out of the chief of sinners. God is glorified in His saints because if we are saints, it's because of His saving power.

Let's not pass up the opportunity to glorify God for what He has done. Listen, that's this morning's first point. If we miss that point, we've missed the point.

The next point for this morning is that we observe All Saints Day for the reminder that we are all a part of what the Creed calls the communion of the saints. God does not simply save us as individuals.

He calls us into this amazing family that spans the globe and spans the generations that we call the church, which ultimately consists not only of our local congregation, but of all believers across the world and even those who have departed this life to be with Jesus.

[7:09] In the great hymn, Let Saints on Earth in Concert Sing, Charles Wesley describes that reality this way when he says, One army of the living God, at His command we bow.

Part of the hosts have crossed the flood, and some are crossing now. That should be encouraging for us. We are on our way to joining that great multitude that we read about in Revelation chapter 7 this morning, of which the text says, They are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple, and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

So that's the destination we're headed to. And our brothers and sisters who have gone before us are already there. Now as I think about the saints who have impacted my life personally, I think especially of my grandmother, Dolores.

From the time I was little, she was always talking to me about Jesus, and I think that her witness was instrumental in my coming to faith in Christ. When I was in college, she developed Alzheimer's disease.

[8:55] It always struck me, though, that long after she could remember much of anything else, she was still talking about Jesus. But she eventually passed away from the disease that had afflicted her.

When I think about the reality of the communion of saints, I think of her. I think of her husband, my grandfather. They may have departed this life, but I am still united with them in Christ.

They are not dead. They are before the throne of God, where I will one day join them in singing the praises of the One who has saved us. I am sure you are all familiar with Hebrews chapter 11, which talks about the Old Testament saints who went before us, how they walked by faith.

So Hebrews 12 then begins by reminding us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And so we are.

Some of them are figures from the Bible, some famous figures from church history, and some I have known in this life, like my grandmother who held me when I was a baby.

[10:17] And the mention of Hebrews chapters 11 and 12 brings me to this morning's final point.

Our calling to follow in the footsteps of those saints who walked by faith, who formed the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us.

In Hebrews chapter 12, we read, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Many before us have run the race of faith that is the Christian life. And it is not always fun and games, is it?

It's a serious race. It involves denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus. It involves battling sin. It involves spiritual warfare and trials and tribulations.

[11:40] But you know what? By God's grace, many ordinary people, just like us, have already run that race faithfully.

In their witness, we find the encouragement to keep going. Their witness speaks to us, Do not give up. Keep going.

Keep walking by faith. The Lord is faithful to finish what He began. In the military, we would regularly have physical fitness tests.

Any other veterans here this morning who fondly remember those days? We have Jim, at least, right? You don't remember physical fitness tests? I'm not a veteran. Well, you were...

Sure you are. Okay. Well, anyway... I remember those tests. Very easy. Yeah. Well, thank you for ruining my illustration, Jim.

[12:44] Now, in the military, we'd regularly have these physical fitness tests. One of the events was the two-mile run. In the army, in my day at least, it was standard practice that once you finish the run, you would stand at the finish line, and you would cheer on your buddies who were approaching the final stretch to encourage them to finish strong.

I think about that image whenever I think about the encouragement that we gain from the cloud of witnesses. Think about the final verse in the gradual hymn we sang just a few minutes ago.

So, Spirit, come, put strength in every stride, give grace for every hurdle, that we may run with faith to win the prize of a servant good and faithful.

As saints of old still line the way, retelling triumphs of His grace, we hear their calls and hunger for the day when with Christ we stand in glory.

I think about those who have gone before, from Abel to St. Paul to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to my grandmother, and I hear their call.

[14:15] I hear their witness about God's faithfulness and His power to save. And I keep going, knowing that Jesus is the author and the finisher of our faith, and that this great multitude is a living demonstration that He is faithful to finish what He started.

This All Saints Sunday, praise God for the witness of those who have gone before. And follow their example of finishing the race through faith in Jesus Christ.

But most of all, glorify God who is able and faithful to take sinners and make them into saints and do trophies of His grace to His glory.

He did that in the lives of all of the saints that we remember today. and He still works the same way here and now in the lives of those who call upon His name.

Thank you, Lord. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.