

Revelation 7: 9-17
Psalm 34: 1-10, 22
I John 3: 1-3
St. Matthew 5: 1-12

All Saints' Day 2023 (transferred)

“And God will wipe all their tears away.”

Revelation 7: 17

When we read the Book of Psalms, we see in the later psalms that members of the holy congregation were called “saints.” For example, many of us were raised with this translation of Psalm 149: “O sing unto the Lord a new song: let the congregation of saints praise him...” The main translation used by Anglicans these days, the NRSV, reads, “Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful...” Clearly, “saints” was seen as equivalent to “the faithful...”

The early Christians often used “saints” when referring to “the faithful congregation.” For example, Paul begins First Corinthians, “To the Church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...”

So, in the biblical era, “saints” wasn’t a holy sub-class of special Christians – the entire congregation was thought to be “saints...”

But words change meaning over time. I think “saints” is sometimes used two ways commonly today. Sometimes, “saint” is used to refer to a patient or virtuous person, whether or not they are people of faith... For example, where I grew up, you might hear a country person say something gossipy like this: “Sheila’s husband, he drinks away his paycheque. She’s a real saint to put up with that behaviour.” In this case, “saint” means a virtuous or patient person...

Another way “saint” is often used today is to refer to some Christians who are obviously very holy, almost without sin, and very virtuous. (They have taken the example of someone who is clearly a wonderful Christian, but kind of put them in a separate class.) Perhaps they’re in heaven already... I think that’s the kind of image of “saints” we have when we look at the stained-glass windows at St. Brice’s, or many other Church buildings...

For example, on my left we see a depiction of David, the great Jewish king. It’s easy to tell it’s David, because he’s holding a musical instrument, a harp, and David was known to have been a prolific musician... On my right we have a depiction of another saint... Can we guess who this might be? Let’s look carefully – what’s he holding?... Another clue is the painter’s palate near his feet... [St. Luke; the patron saint of artists]

Now, there’s no question that the Church family recognizes particular heroes, particular saints, and so we should. (If you’d like more of an introduction to the saints, I or other leaders can help.)

The saints were all amazing people – not without their faults, but certainly, people of faith... I encourage us to learn more about these heroes of the faith. If we face adversities or hard times, we might learn from their examples. As they were faithful in *their* generation, we can learn more how we can be faithful in *our* generation...

Let's note, though, that the Church doesn't *make* saints. *God* makes saints. The Church recognizes some faithful believers whose lives were so obviously radiant with the love of Jesus...

There are far more faithful people than the ones we recognize. For example, John records his great vision,

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne [of God] and before the Lamb [that is, the risen Jesus Christ himself]... (7: 9)

Let's note it's a multitude that "*no one* could count..."

Trying to describe his vision later in the book, John describes "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (21: 2)..." Jerusalem was probably the largest gathered community of the faithful the author could think of, and the company of saints is like a huge new gathering of the faithful – the "new Jerusalem..."

So, while the Church recognizes particular heroes, we freely admit that the population of the faithful includes far more than we can number or count – but what's most important, God knows who are his... That's why we celebrate "All Saints' Day" on or around the first of November. We're celebrating those heroes near and far – including those whom God alone knows their name...

My caution about observing particular saints is that we can end up thinking they are amazing people we can admire, but we can *never* be like them... I suggest that, in contrast, God wants us to think, "they are amazing people we can admire, and *we can* be like them..." By the grace of God, we are a congregation made up of the faithful. I am fully convinced that there are a bunch of saints in this room – or at least, saints in the making... The point is that "saints" is not supposed to be sub-class of virtuous people whom we can never be. Instead, we can celebrate that God in his gracious mercy is constantly calling us all to our true home, helping us to get rid of the pesky sins which cling so closely, and making us more and more loving by the Spirit of Jesus...

The author of Hebrews puts it this way,

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (10: 23-25)...

May we appreciate the saints through history, and how they can help us draw nearer into our Lord's divine life... May we be grateful for the saints through history whose names we don't know, but who are included in God's great economy... And by the grace of God, may we too be counted among the faithful, united with Jesus Christ and one another in the kingdom of heaven, "where every tear will be wiped away;" when we are immersed in God's divine love, now and for ever.

Amen.