

Isaiah 25: 6-9  
Psalm 24  
Revelation 21: 1-6a  
St. John 11: 32-44

All Saints' Day 2024

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"[God] will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes." Revelation 21: 3b

I don't know if you have ever been in the position of being on the stage of a large auditorium or theatre, when the stage lights have been turned on. Standard electric stage lights generate at least 500 watts full of brilliance, and the lights are typical above and on the side of the stage, to ensure that there are no shadows. The advantage of this is that wherever the audience is in the theatre, they can see clearly what is happening on the stage. The downside of this is for the people on the stage, we can't see who is in the auditorium!... We might be able to identify people in the first row or two, but the rest is a sea of darkness because of the brilliant lights shining on us... We can't see people, but we know they are there...

I suggest this experience is the same for the saints of the Church... We know we are among them. We know there is "a great cloud of witnesses..." We can know the people closest to us (in the front row, as it were) – faithful members in the next pew at St. Brice's, or those who introduced us to Jesus Christ and his Church, perhaps when we were quite young. *These* ones, we know. The ones closest to us, we know...

How do we know who are God's saints?... Ultimately, *God* knows who are his... It's not our place to judge, because our perspective is always incomplete... It is only God who can see the depths of each human heart with perfect clarity... But, as the English bishop Michael Green said a few years ago, "We can have a jolly good idea..." Obviously there are people we know who choose only to be self-indulgent, who have no interest in eternal matters, who not only sin but who boast in their sinful ways... They are more likely to have not yet recognized God's invitation...

In contrast, we know people who desire to seek the Lord; whose lives are radiant with the love of Christ; who bear the fruit of the Spirit and who are regular in worship and in building the kingdom of God... When we develop friends within the Church family – as we should – new friends, as well as old – we get to know other people's priorities... We can have a reliable sense about who is full of faith and peace...

Together, we also learn what *God* is like – God's priorities – shown supremely through his Son, Jesus Christ... Our God is merciful and loving, his love and desire for restored relationship with us is so deep, he gave himself for us as a perfect offering through Jesus Christ, once and for all... We know that God continues to be in the business of making disciples, building his kingdom, and drawing us home... Because we know God and the breadth of his mercy, we have good reason to have humble confidence that there are many, many souls – beyond count – who belong to him...

The evangelist St. John records our Lord saying on the night of his betrayal, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places... (John 14: 1)” That is to say, there is lots of room, as it were, in the kingdom of heaven...

So, we have a sense of the enormity of the communion of saints! Some of them, close to us, we know, because we worship with them week by week... To carry on with the analogy of the stage, there are others who have stood on the stage before us... Some of them have been famous people – heroes of the faith... The apostles, of course. The prophets and martyrs. Even the Old Testament leaders – Hebrews 11 makes clear that Israel’s great leaders in some sense had faith in Jesus, even though they preceded him in history. The Blessed Virgin Mary, whom God chose to be the unique figure to be the faithful, glorious agent of the Word’s incarnation as Jesus!... The authors of the New Testament, including the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, whose human name we might not know, but who God surely knows, intimately, and loves beyond measure... Surely these are all included in the kingdom of light...

God has continued to be at work through history... Some of the famous names we know – John Chrysostom, whose prayer many of us here use regularly in private devotions; Benedict, the human agent of praying monastic communities, which are the foundation of our Anglican Prayer Book. St. Alban the first English martyr; even St. Brice’s, whose late allegiance to Jesus was a beautiful testimony to God’s Spirit being able to pierce even the most self-centred of hearts...

What of the Reformers – Martin Luther, or Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, or John Calvin or others?... What of the great hymn writers, who gave us powerful songs of praise throughout the ages – John Wesley so many others – the musical saints who point us to Jesus?...

Let’s not limit ourselves to Anglican Christians... Surely the great vineyard of the coming King contains many expressions of the Christian Church, from eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic and Protestant and Pentecostal expressions... God knows who are his... But we can have a “jolly good idea” of some of the famous heroes...

We also acknowledge with gratitude with people we *don’t* know, but who are part of the great auditorium. We can’t see their faces. It’s irrelevant whether or not you and I know them... What matters is, *God* knows them. God gave himself for them. They belong...

November 1 is “All Saints’ Day,” an important feast day on the calendar of many churches... At St. Brice’s, as is a common practice today, feast days are often moved to an nearby Sunday; they are “transferred...” So we are celebrating today, that God’s kingdom is beyond human measure, and there are countless faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, whose names we do not know, but with whom we are in fellowship...

The reason we celebrate the communion of saints is not because all the saints were perfect people in this life (they certainly were not)... But we acknowledge with gratitude that their lives were radiant with the love of Jesus. We want to be like them in our fidelity to Jesus Christ. As they have been faith-full, we want to be faith-full... And, we are grateful for their on-going intercessions; their on-going prayers in the heavenly realms, for us; for everyone...

All glory to be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has defeated sin and death through Christ's death; and for his resurrection which follows. Thanks be to God for all the great number who belong to him...

By the grace of God, one future day – one glorious day – we all will encounter the glorified Jesus Christ face to face... Then, too, we will be able to know the communion of all the saints, from all kinds of cultures and backgrounds. We will be able to see them, not because the stage lights illuminating ourselves are turned *off*, but rather, that the whole vast company is illuminated, shining with the Spirit's light!...

The author of Revelation concludes his vision of the life to come, describing a place where there is no more darkness, but we all enjoy being bathed in Christ's glorious light together. Revelation 21 reads,

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations.

Alleluia! Amen...