

ALL SAINTS' DAY

Matthew 5:3

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven." In a way this encapsulates what All Saints' Day is all about. The saints in heaven are blessed, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. They get to be with Jesus, the Lamb upon His throne. They are sheltered with His presence. They are satisfied, comforted.

But they didn't get there easily. "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation," says the elder to the apostle John in today's First Reading from Revelation. "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." They are *Christians*, believers in Jesus Christ, and for that reason they suffered. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to eternal life. It's no walk in the park, as they say, but a race that calls for endurance. "In this world you will have tribulation," Jesus said. And He would know, for He Himself endured the horrors of the cross, despising its shame; and yet, look where He is now: seated at the right hand of the throne of God, glorified. So, too, the saints who have gone before us, who were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, endured their own crosses for the joy that was set before them, and have entered into it. They were granted this for Jesus' sake, who is the author and perfecter of our faith. It is God who called us to faith by the Gospel, and God who *keeps* us in the one true faith.

We remember the saints, then, not because they were such good people, but because they are examples to us of how good *God* is, showing mercy to poor, miserable sinners. And that's no insult. They themselves were under no delusion, believing that their own deeds would save them. In their own words, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" They despaired of their own efforts and gave God the glory, looking in hope to Christ alone.

And that hope was not misplaced. Although they had tribulation in this life, they have come out of it, clutching the palm branch of Christ's victory, and gladly serve Him day and night in His temple in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. And they are poor in spirit no more.

But the saints on earth are also blessed. Notice the tense of Jesus' verbs: "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven." This is not just a future reality we're talking about, but a present one with future implications. You don't have to be dead to be blessed. "Beloved, we are God's children *now*," made holy by the Spirit of our God in our Baptism. Baptism is not just plain water, but a washing of rebirth and

renewal by the Holy Spirit, by which we are adopted into the family of God and become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. We are clothed with the robe of *Christ's* righteousness that covers all our sin. We are *saints*.

The problem is we don't *feel* like it. I've got a t-shirt at home that says "saint" on the front in sort of gothic lettering:



And whenever I wear it, someone will invariably say to me something like, "Oh, wow, a saint," like I'm, I don't know, trying to advertise my own holiness, or something. What they don't realize is that the word is actually an ambigram, a word that reads the same upside down or becomes a different word entirely. In this case, when you turn the word upside down (and those of you with the manuscript can actually try this) it transforms from "saint" into the word "sinner." So, while others may look at me and see "saint," I look down and see only "sinner."

What about you? What do you see? When you look at yourself, do you see a saint, a holy one of God? Or do you see a sinner? A failure? A lost cause? We're all pretty good at putting on a good face while we're here, because here is the place where saints are supposed to look like saints, right? That's what everybody else thinks. They think that we're just here to pat ourselves on the back and talk about how bad everyone out there is. But that's just not true. We smile on the outside, but inside we are mourning. We kneel for confession, but inwardly we are struggling with pride. We feign contentment, but secretly we are unsatisfied. We show mercy to others, but receive none ourselves. We worship God, but feel dirty about it, having just spent the whole week sinning against Him. We strive for peace with everyone, but feel more alone than ever. We are faithful, but never seem to receive the things promised. God may *call* us His children, but when we look down, "sinner" is all we see.

Is that really the kind of people God wants? Is that what He wants in His saints? But, hang on. Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the *strong* in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," He says, "Blessed are the *poor* in spirit." What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Just what He says in the rest of the Beatitudes. The poor in spirit are those who mourn over their sin. They are the meek, who acknowledge their inability to free themselves from their sinful condition. They are those who hunger and thirst for

righteousness, because no matter how hard they try, they always come up short. They are the merciful, knowing God's own kindness and compassion. They are the pure in heart, calling upon God in the day of trouble. They are the peacemakers, seeking reconciliation. They are the persecuted for righteousness' sake, foolish and weak in the eyes of the world. They are remarkably unremarkable, not impressive or outstanding in any way.

But they are blessed, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. For God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. It is precisely to the undeserving, the failures and the lost causes, that God gives His greatest gifts: comfort, an inheritance, righteousness, mercy, holiness, a family, an eternal kingdom. You may not see it, but Jesus said it, and that's how we know it's true.

So, both the saints in heaven and on earth are blessed, and this is all from God. For through the law comes knowledge of sin, as we heard in last week's Epistle. We don't really humble ourselves, but God does that *to* us through His Word. *He* humbles us, makes us meek, shows us just how much we must suffer for the sake of His name. But He also gives us faith, forgives our sin, and leads us on the narrow way. He has mercy on us and purifies us and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, having made peace with us by the blood of His cross.

And we need to know that. We need to know that we are blessed. We need to know how *God* sees us and where this all eventually leads, because in this world we too will have trouble. Unlike the saints in heaven, we have yet to come out of the great tribulation. We're still in it, and we don't know what the changes and chances of life will bring. But we know it won't be easy. Temptations to sin are sure to come. Sin is alive and well in us. The love of the world is intoxicating. And we Christians are a special project for the devil. He doesn't need to worry so much about those who *aren't* saints, who *don't* believe in God's Son, but he really has it out for those who are. He hates them, and his evil plan and purpose is to get them to put down their crosses, despise the promises, and forget the joy that lies ahead.

But that's why we have All Saints' Day, where we remember those who have gone before us. Because of them, we don't have to wonder what the outcome of all this will be. We *know*, because in them we have literally countless examples of God's faithfulness. We see how our heavenly Father has safely brought His people through trials before. How He sustained them through the worst that the devil, the world, and their sinful flesh could muster, completing the good work He began in them. How Christ by His death and resurrection has made our death a portal from the strife of this

life to His joy immortal. And that gives us hope. That strengthens us to run the race with endurance, fixing our eyes on Jesus, because that's what *they* did. They looked neither to the right or to the left, or down, discouraged by the big "sinner" they saw there. They looked to Jesus, who called them *blessed*. And so, poor in spirit though they were, the kingdom of heaven was, and is, theirs.

And so, dear saints, fix your eyes on Jesus. His promises are true, His Word unbreakable. You are holy, even if you don't feel like it. Remember the saints. We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. But just as they once struggled like us, so shall we one day shine like them. That'll be *us* coming out of the great tribulation, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in our hands, crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" In a way, it already is. How blessed we are.

In † Jesus name. Amen.

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