



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 4 November 2007
Title: **"Who Are These?"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Ecclesiasticus 44: 1-10,13-14
Second Reading Revelation 7: 2-4,9-17
Gospel Matthew 5: 1-12

One of the commentaries I use for sermon preparation deals with one of the verses from today's epistle in the following way: "'Who are these, robed in white robes, and where have they come from?' (Rev. 8: 13) We must know if All Saints Day is not to be just a form of vague day-dream without any reference to our real lives. It should be a celebration of what we are in the process of becoming, for the feast of All Saints is also the feast of the possible saint who is I myself!"

The main traditions of the Christian faith have been at loggerheads for centuries over the issue of the saints. The catholic and orthodox tradition has so cultivated the idea of a communion of prayer and mutual support that, in its more extreme forms, it rivals Hinduism or Buddhism in its cast of thousands of godlike saints and spirits who receive devotion and even prayer. On the extreme of the other side, the Protestant aversion to devotion to anyone but God Himself has led to an enormous rift between the living and the dead that challenges the norm of Scripture almost as much: those who are dead appear to be cut off from the concern of those still on earth and visa versa. That's why a return to the Bible when speaking about saints is in order to keep the balance, and keep the peace. In Scripture, we are reminded that only God is God and deserving of worship. On the other hand, we are told that the fellowship

of the faithful, both in heaven and on earth, is a unit and that mutual prayer is the tie that renews what we have in common: our fellowship in Jesus Christ.

While I would hold that not all Christians are worthy to hold up as examples to others, I would say that all those who follow Christ and commit themselves to Him must at least make themselves available for that role. There is a sign over the door to my office that reads "Be careful how you live- you may be the only Bible that some people read." Indeed, you may be as close to a saint as many of those you meet will ever come, and how tragic if they are put off following the Christian Way because of your bad example.

On the other hand, those who we call saints- in the official sense- weren't perfect. They were, in the main, a rather common lot- men and women of all walks of life, temperaments and abilities. Some of them were well documented as being unpleasant and downright nasty! In many cases, it wasn't that their character defects were overcome or down away with, but that their limitations became harnessed to the service of God and the service of the patchwork quilt that is the Church.

The celebration of All Saints, whenever a congregation chooses to do so, is not meant to be a kind of old-fashioned Disney film with animated characters representing types and caricatures, but not real people. In fact, the best way of observing All Saints is by reading some of the lives of the saints written by historians, not pious devotees. These stories will amaze you with the ordinary details and the boring routines of many of the lives you will find there- altogether too much like yours and mine to be completely foreign and off-putting, on the one hand, or to let us off easy, on the other, when we are tempted to say: "I couldn't possibly be one too."

That is the reason that the Gospel for this feast is always the Beatitudes. These famous sayings that form a core of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount have little or nothing to say about heaven or even the Communion of Saints. They are, rather, encouragements towards living fully engaged and living fully aware in the here and

now. Even their mention of the Kingdom of God is not a promise of “pie in the sky when you die”, but is a reminder that the Kingdom of God is theirs now who observe these simple precepts. The Kingdom is breaking through into a dark and sinful world every time we embody mercy, make peace or show compassion. To live in the Kingdom here and now is the best way to prepare for that final revelation at the end of time when we will know and be known perfectly.

Yes, we do need to know who the saints are, not only because they may be our neighbors for all eternity, but more immediately because they show us that life in the Kingdom of God is possible, not just a dream. What they are, we are in the process of becoming, until the imperfect, sinful, underachieving, disappointing and often disagreeable people we are are shown to have a special and unique role in the Communion of all the redeemed who find in Jesus Christ their meaning for living and their goal in dying.

“Who are these?” the author of Revelation asks about those he sees in his vision. The answer is, at least potentially, they are you and me- saints in the making and citizens-in-training for the Kingdom of God where “[the Lamb] will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev. 8:17)