

Revelation 7:9-17  
Psalm 34:1:10, 22  
1 John 3:1-3  
MATTHEW 5:1-12

## For All the Saints

“For all the saints, who from their labors rest,  
Who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
Thy Name, O Jesus, be forever blessed.  
Alleluia, alleluia!”

The word “saint” is commonly used in two senses. There are what you could call the “Hall of Fame” saints with a capital “S” – the Blessed Virgin Mary, Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, Barnabas and the others who have their days marked in red on our church calendars. Then there are all the deeply faithful, in the meaning of today’s Psalm: “Fear the Lord, you that are his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.” Those who have “the fear of the Lord” – or a deep sense of *awe* and humility before God – at the heart of who they are find that they “lacked nothing.” St. Paul wrote, “I learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Want to learn this “secret,” one which is both timeless and timely? Read up on the saints, both big-time and obscure, both ancient and recent – and the ones who still walk this world as well. Saints were not and are not perfect; only Jesus Christ is perfect. So, if you think you couldn’t possibly be called to be one of the Saints of God, guess again – God has been making diamonds out of coal for thousands of years; all it takes is a desire to burn with love for God and for others. Perhaps all who are called to heaven will be made perfect there, but we and millions of others who yet toil below can be made into saints in the meantime.

Technically, the Episcopal Church lists only major New Testament figures as saints, and unlike the Roman Catholics we have no procedure for declaring someone new to be a saint, but informally there are a number of major post-biblical figures who we commonly refer to as saints and whose lives can deeply inspire us.

Take, for example, the story of a shepherd boy who was kidnapped and enslaved at the age of 16, suffered for six years during which time he learned to pray to and welcome guidance from God, escaped, and returned to his homeland in a remarkable adventure. Then, feeling a profound calling, he studied for the priesthood, and *returned to the nation which had kidnapped and enslaved him determined to convert that nation to Christianity and change it profoundly.* He did both. As a result of his labors, his adopted country became vigorously Christian, abolished infant sacrifice, *abolished slavery*, and became a center of learning and of faith which in the generations after his death would play a crucial role in restoring both faith and learning across several other countries.

I think you've heard of him. This ex-slave was named **Patrick**, patron saint of Ireland.

We've only recently celebrated a remarkable man who, after a dissolute and self-indulgent youth, changed his way of life radically and embraced "lady poverty" and with her confronted and challenged the Church to return to its roots ministering to and with and for the poor, for peace, and with care for all creatures great and small. He also gave a profound example of humility as his fame grew and of patient suffering and love as his health failed: **Francis** of Assisi.

Another saint who understood suffering lived earlier – in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries – in a coastal town of what is now Turkey. He was arrested by the Roman police under the terrible persecution of the Christian Church by the emperor Diocletian, imprisoned for being Christian, and tortured. Some people who have suffered greatly just need to spend their subsequent years recovering, others look to settle scores, while others find people who are suffering and seek to help them. He was one of the third kind.

The most often abused people in his town, he learned, were sailors and children, so he became their defender. There were no laws about child abuse or neglect in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman Empire, so he created a whole radically new tradition of intervention by the church – he was a priest and later a bishop – on behalf of children who were abused or neglected. After his death, his people said, "Let's keep doing what he did" as did others. We will celebrate his feast day December 6 – but really, we celebrate the ministry he launched every time we bring in something for a child in a shelter, *and* every time one of *our* families who have taken in foster children and/or adopted children who were in risky situations walks in these doors. His name is **Nicholas**.

Others you may know less well. Vibia Perpetua was a young woman of Carthage, North Africa who along with her servant Felicitas were among the new Christians who refused to worship the Roman Emperor and who as a result were thrown into the arena to be gored by wild animals and murdered by gladiators for the amusement of the populace.

But like so many others, their courageous, joyous, serenity in the face of martyrdom evoked amazement and curiosity in some of those who witnessed their deaths, and imperial efforts to exterminate Christianity boomeranged.

They died in the year 203. Perpetua was 22 years old. Both she and Felicitas were mothers of infants, but that didn't matter to their persecutors, who could not intimidate these young women who, filled with the Holy Spirit, sang victory psalms as they were led into the arena. Unlike most of the martyrs, unlike most women of ancient times, we have Perpetua's own words preserved, which describe the visions she had reassuring her of her salvation and coming entrance into heaven. She writes, "I woke up realizing that I would be contending not with wild animals but with the devil himself. I knew, however, that I would win."

She did. That's what we celebrate today.

And the martyrs were not just from long ago. The first African Church leader of any sort I ever heard was Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda, who came to Boston to speak in the late 1970's, during the reign of terror in his country by the brutal dictator Idi Amin. Amin brutalized many people, especially Christians. The Anglican Archbishop of

Uganda himself died while in police custody. The government claimed he had died in a car crash, but one photograph of one crash was shown on the 6 o'clock news, and a different picture of a different car was shown on the 11 o'clock news so, shall we say, not everyone bought the Amin regime's story.

Bishop Festo told us of the young Christians who, after having refused to cooperate with the atrocities of the regime, were rounded up by Amin's army and brought into a soccer stadium to be shot. The whole town was ordered into the stadium at gunpoint to watch the executions in an effort to intimidate the community. Then something remarkable happened. The boys went up to the soldiers and forgave them for what they were about to do. They said they knew that they were just following orders. The boys said that they would pray for the soldiers, that they knew they themselves would shortly be with Jesus and that they hoped the soldiers would come to know Jesus Christ before they themselves died.

The community was not intimidated. It was converted. Amin failed.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Suffering for the faith goes on today. The entire Christian population of Mosul, in northern Iraq, had to evacuate their city and move north into Kurdistan because the government of Iraq was either unable or unwilling to protect them from terrorists. Christian churches in Pakistan have been bombed. And how easy do you think it is to be a Christian in Communist China, or in Myanmar, or in North Korea, or in Darfur, or in many, many places in our world today?

We read today's scriptures of joy and reassurance: "We *are* God's children now," the first Letter of John tells us. John of Patmos wrote to his fellow Christians who were being martyred steadily by the Roman Empire of his vision of heaven, of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of God assuring his readers that "these are they who have come out of the great ordeal."

We are able today to have Bibles because some of the saints who came before us hid the individual precious sacred writings from the Roman secret police. We are able to read the Bible in English in part because of the faithfulness until death of William Tyndale, mentioned by Fr. Breedlove three weeks ago, who wanted to bring a printed Bible to people in a language they could understand no matter what the King thought. We worship in English using The Book of Common Prayer: the author of the first Book of Common Prayer, Thomas Cranmer, was burned at the stake for writing it, after there was a regime change in England.

Our gathering here this morning is possible because of the saints who have gone before us, including many who have shown extraordinary faith, extraordinary accomplishments and extraordinary courage. They gave their lives so that we, and others, could have a prayer.

Our gathering here this morning is surrounded by an invisible cheering section of those who have gone before us in faith – including those known personally to us who have inspired and strengthened us. Our gathering here this morning is also surrounded by our sisters and brothers in Christ on every continent, many of whom have challenges and dangers greater than any we are likely to know.

Let us be worthy heirs of those who have gone before us and worthy allies of those, near and far, who need our strength today. Let us grow in faith, looking forward to heaven more than to any earthly reward. Let us read the Beatitudes in today's Gospel, and resolve to model ourselves on them, and so be blessed by Christ.

Let us be among the saints of God for our century.

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