

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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THE TRUE TREASURES OF THE CHURCH

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Text of a Sermon preached on All Saints Sunday

November 1, 2020

REVELATION 7:1-2, 15-18 | PSALM 34:1-10, 22

I JOHN 3:1-3 | MATTHEW 5:1-12

In AD 258 the Emperor Valerian issued an edict that all bishops, priests and deacons should at once be arrested and put on trial. The Pope, Sixtus II, was one of the first to be seized. He had entrusted the treasury of the church to the deacon Laurence with instructions to distribute everything to the widows and orphans, which Laurence did, even selling the sacred vessels.

As the Pope was being taken to execution Laurence followed him in tears. 'Where are you hurrying to Holy Father? And what have I done? Why are you going to the sacrifice without your deacon? I have done your command with the treasures of the Church.'

'I am not leaving you my son. You will follow me in three days.'

Laurence was soon arrested. The prefect demanded that he produce the treasures of the Church. ‘The Church is indeed rich,’ said Laurence. ‘I will show you the treasures but give me a little time together them.’

Time was given, and Laurence went over the city seeking the widows and orphans and lame and aged whom the Church supported. He gathered them all together in rows in front of the church, then went out and brought the Prefect. ‘Here are the Church’s treasures!’

The enraged Prefect promised Laurence a slow and painful death, and he was chained to a gridiron over a slow fire.

Happy All Saints Day! This day is our annual family reunion where we remember who has taught us the love of God – and who are the real treasurers of the church. All are invited as we gather to be reminded of the people and the stories that make us who we are. If you know Jesus, a saint has introduced you to him, and invited you join them at this celebration.

“After this I, John, 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 and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying,
“Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

“I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”

Then he said to me,
“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Since the church’s beginning, persecution has defined who we think of as “saints.” In the second century, Tertullian argued: “The blood of

the martyrs is the seed of the church.” It turns out that, historically, it is not that simple. Sometimes persecution destroys the church, as in the modern day middle east as one million Iraqi Christians have been reduced to 100,000 living in exile in Syria. And no native believers living in Saudi Arabia. Still, today we are thankful for Christians who live in secret.

Suffering and sacrifice is the mark of the saint. When our faith is tested, it can be refined. If we maintain our witness and persevere, losing fortune or reputation, John tells us our reward will be the immense joy of being in the company of those who have gone through what we have, and seeing in each other a change that could only have come through enduring.

John’s church was taught to understand that transformation in this remarkable image: “See what love the Father has given us.... when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

At the root of sainthood is love. Not only are we promised that we will see the purpose of our suffering, we are promised that our suffering will be transformed in a vision of what we always were meant to become.

Today, we honor all saints, because whether they were marked by their suffering in a hospital bed, or at the hands of violent powers, or the randomness of life, their witness takes us back to the first words that Jesus taught us on the Galilean hillside:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are you who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”

Here we are. Are we trying to do what is right? He looked out upon the crowd and saw each and every one of us! His eyes met ours, and he showed us the way of the saint. The secret of the kingdom is love’s endurance.

The secret of the kingdom is not giving up on righteousness and goodness. Every time we do what is right, we prepare to meet him face to face.

Today, we will reaffirm our baptismal vows, our life in Christ. It is our great joy to do so, not alone, not just in this congregation, but surrounded by the love and example of everyone who showed us the good, the true, and the beautiful – everyone who pointed to the righteous path of Christ.

I will invoke the presence of my mother, my great aunt, my many teachers. I will not pray to my lost loved ones. I will touch them, embrace them, as I draw strength and courage from them, as my heart overflows with love for them. St. Teresa of Avila said: “I do not pray to God. I simply love him.”

One of those saints taught me that this day is not about freezing goodness in the past, but breaking it loose for the future. On her deathbed she said to me: “I do not take comfort that I will be with my loved ones after I die. I am happy to know that I will learn to love everyone who is there.”

Treasuring all this in our hearts, we may return to Laurence, deacon to the pope. In a lighthearted way, he forced the rulers to see the true treasures of the church. It is said that Laurence was so eager to taste the joys of heaven and to witness to God’s goodness on earth, that when he was slowly roasting over the roman coals, he yelled out to the Prefect that, since he was not yet done on the other side, he should now be turned!

A little while later he said: ‘Now it’s done enough — all ready to be served.’ He then prayed for the conversion of Rome. In the next generation, his prayer came true.

The apostle James says, “the prayers of the righteous availeth much; they are powerful, and always working.” We invoke those prayers, that love in action, as we remember their lives and example. We love them back and so look to be changed into the likeness of the one who is coming to find treasures in us.

My treasures. Happy All Saints Day!