

Sermon for All Saints' Day, November 1, 2019

Solemn Said Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Ecclesiasticus 44:1–10, 13–14; Psalm 149; Revelation 7:2–4, 9–17; Matthew 5:1–12

I often look at the late Massey Shepherd's commentary on the 1928 Prayer Book, published in 1950, when I want to know about the traditional readings associated with Sundays and major feast days. For All Saints' Day, Massey begins with the possibility of a commemoration of "All Martyrs" from the third century; he says there's more evidence for these commemorations in the fourth century.¹ For the record, his work is confirmed by more recent scholarship.² In addition, Massey wrote these words about this feast, "Sometime between 607 and 610 Pope Boniface IV obtained permission to take over the famous Pantheon in Rome (which had been closed since the fifth century)"—over a hundred years—"for Christian worship."³ Under Boniface, the Pantheon was dedicated to St. Mary and All Martyrs on May 13 in the same year. It's worth noting for us as Anglicans that among the earliest evidence for a November 1 celebration of All Saints is from late eighth-century England.⁴

¹ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 255–56.

² Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 184.

³ Shepherd, 255–56.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Back to Rome. The idea of sixth-century Rome, with one of humankind's greatest buildings being closed for over a hundred years, made me think of a 2002 novel by the British writer Ian Pears, *The Dream of Scipio*.⁵ It begins in modern France, and leaps backward to fifth-century Gaul—the Roman name for southern France. The novel moves forward in time from there. In the fifth century, the Roman Empire is collapsing in the West—and the Dark Ages, that really were dark, were arriving.⁶

Among the novel's characters is a patrician named Manlius. He is not a person of faith but decides to accept an invitation to become a bishop to try to preserve what he can of the world that he had known from his youth that is disappearing. As bishop, he decides that he will not fight the invading Goths and Burgundians, but will submit and be subject to them. He saves what he can and dies regarded as a local saint.

We learn from the work of historian Peter Brown that Christian bishops after the legalization of Christianity

⁵ Ian Pears, *The Dream of Scipio* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002).

⁶ Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

were newly powerful and often wealthy.⁷ I had forgotten that in the novel, when Manlius dies unexpectedly, his body was dismembered within an hour of his death and what remained was interred in the church—so that church could become a place of pilgrimage—and income.⁸

Augustine of Hippo, who died in the year 430, was, in the beginning, very critical of the practices of moving and dismembering the bodies of martyrs and saints—and critical of Bishop Ambrose of Milan on this issue. But in the year 415, while Augustine was bishop of Hippo in North Africa, that city became a repository for some famous relics of Saint Stephen, and Bishop Augustine’s attitude changed.⁹

Peter Brown in his book *The Cult of the Saints* reminds us that Christianity arises within the culture of its time and place. There was nothing unusual about visits to the graves of the departed that would include drinking and eating.¹⁰ The departed were “invisible friends”—and the most important were the “invisible friends” who were

⁷ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 8–9.

⁸ Pears, 14–17.

⁹ Bradshaw and Johnson, 185–86.

¹⁰ Brown, 26.

martyrs, that is, “friends of God.”¹¹ Tombs and reliquaries were places where believers could be especially close to God’s friends and ask God’s friends for help. Let me say, it’s a large subject, and one I’m barely touching tonight. It’s hard for me to put myself in that world.

I know I am person of my time and place. I am a child of the Protestant Reformation, not the Roman Catholicism of my father’s almost entirely Irish immigrant family. I am, by my choice as a young adult, an Episcopalian, an Anglican Christian.

With the Reformation in England and elsewhere, the cult of the saints would be declared non-biblical. Of course, it was the Christians of the centuries that gave of us the Bible who were deeply committed to relationships with the departed. Guardian angels are mentioned by Jesus in Matthew.¹² At the beginning of a chapter in Peter Brown’s book called, “The Invisible Companion,” he quotes a fifth-century bishop to convey this triumph of the popular Christianity: “The philosophers and the orators”—in other words, the pagans—“have fallen into oblivion; the masses do not

¹¹ Ibid., 5–6.

¹² Matthew 18:10.

even know the names of the emperor . . . but everyone knows the names of the martyrs, better than those of their most intimate friend.”¹³

Tonight we will sing one of the greatest hymns of our Anglican tradition, *For all the saints*. The hymn tune enriches the meaning of the words and lifts hearts and souls. Theologically, the words praise God for God’s faithfulness and for the men and women who, through the centuries, have followed Jesus Christ. But it doesn’t speak directly of their help and their prayers for us mortals.

I always say a prayer I travel by plane during takeoff and landing. For years it was always a Lord’s Prayer or Hail Mary. A few years ago, out of the blue, I found myself repeating until we got in the air, “I belong to Christ.” I’m beginning to think that it may be a very Christian thing to learn how to talk to my deceased parents and others I miss and not to wait to thank them, to speak of

¹³ Brown, 50.

love and life, and to learn in a new way that in Christ we are all alive.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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