

All Saints' Sunday

Solemn Mass

November 7, 2021

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Ecclesiasticus 44:1–10, 13–14; Psalm 149;

Revelation 7:2–4, 9–17; Matthew 5:1–12

For centuries in the Christian world, in both East and West, the saints were powerful. “Christians prayed *for* their (ordinary) dead, but they prayed *to* the martyrs,” says one historian.¹ They did this because they believed that the martyr-saints were with God and had the power to help them. The suffering and the death of the martyr were regarded as heroic, but also as sacrificial. The martyrs went to their deaths willingly, later accounts insist, not to secure a reputation for heroism, but rather for the sake of the Christian community. They demonstrate what faith in Christ can look like because they steadfastly refuse to worship anyone—or anything—else. Their laser-like focus on Christian truth and their immovable adherence to the faith makes them models to be imitated, but it also makes them something more important: they become bridges between this world and God’s heavenly kingdom. This is the source of their considerable power, which even included, in the minds of some, the power to forgive

¹ Bartlett, Robert, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 3.

sins, and, from their place in the heavens, to intercede before the throne of God on behalf of all who turned to them for help. In a sense, the power of the martyr saints is founded on just this: they endured.

Endurance is the mark of another kind of early Christian saint, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the earliest Christian monastics. When we read the sayings of these monks, we often hear them ask, “What do I need to do to be saved?” And what they mean by this is not “being saved” in the evangelical sense. They are not hoping for a conversion experience. That is a given. Most of them are not beginners. The monks are looking for something else. They want to be intimate with God. They want *God!* They want somehow to be able to walk on that bridge where the martyrs had first walked. They believed that through prayer, through fasting and work, through learning, reading, and repeating Scripture, through doing battle with their passions and desires, and through loving others, they could achieve that deep intimacy with God. They believed that if they could only persevere in the hard and sometimes lonely ascetic life, then everything that was not God would grow dim and shrink and manageable. That was salvation for them: God, not the world.

The Rolling Stones famously sang, “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, well, you might find you get what you need.” I think that those early Christian saints, martyrs and monks, would not have disagreed: the first, ardent desire of the neophyte must be tested, shaped, molded, broken, shaped again, tested more than once, if it is ever going to approach something like perfection, whatever that may be. The goal at the beginning is seldom what we are given at the end, the things we really need. And to get those things, the saints consistently tell us: stop aiming for a two-dimensional image of sainthood. Stop trying to impress. Admit that you are fallible, imperfect, and profoundly human, so you can learn what it means to be *truly* human: made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26) and a participant in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

In today’s gospel we hear Jesus say, “Blessed—which is to say fortunate, rich, prosperous, happy, endowed with divine favor—blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). This verse was foundational for the early Christian monastics. They recognized that intimacy with God could only be achieved through humility. This didn’t mean hatred of self, spiritual masochism, or *false* humility. It meant realizing that we are dependent on God and on each other. They understood the paradox: to get *strong*, we need to acknowledge who we are and who we are not,

what we can do and what we can't. We need to admit the terrifying truth: sometimes we are weak. The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust *is* the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:7–8). So, it seems: Trusting in the Lord makes you strong. Jesus obviously agrees. For him, to be rooted in God's word, is to be rooted in something greater than self. And paying attention to good roots and firm foundations gives good results. It helps you stay on the path and to know that God walks with us on the way.

If truth be told, few of us are as God-obsessed as the martyrs or the monks. But Jesus' words today are for us, too, not just for them. We, too, are on the way, though our way may be rather different. The New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, in her very helpful commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, gives us an interpretation of the first Beatitude that is, I think, meant for us struggling individuals trying to live in community. She writes, "'Poor in spirit' is in part a synonym for the people who have enough humility that they do not operate from a sense of pride: the poor in spirit are those who recognize that they are both the

beneficiaries of the help of others and part of a system in which they are to pay it forward and help those whom they can. [The] poor in spirit are those who do *not* sit around saying, ‘Look at what I’ve accomplished,’ or worse, feel resentful because they have not received what they consider sufficient honor. They know they did the right thing; they know God knows, and that’s sufficient recognition indeed.”²

Here at Saint Mary’s, we sit amid the saints; we are surrounded by images of the twelve apostles, those embarrassingly fallible, deeply human saints. In the end, we revere them because the Risen Lord helped them to understand what it means to be poor in spirit. They failed, they fell, they got up, went on, and created communities where other people, like you and me, our ancestors in the faith, could know what it is to be loved by God, and to know what it is to be saved.

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² Levine, Amy-Jill, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 8.