

All Saints On Their Knees

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: November 1, 2023

Readings

Revelation 7.9-17

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1.11-23

Matthew 5.1-12

Opening

Relatively speaking, it hasn't been very long that local churches have adopted mission statements. Maybe they've been around for 50 years, but that's not very long. In the business world, experts in this exercise say that a mission statement ought to capture the specific work an organization will do; what makes their contribution to their industry or to the world truly unique. And so from organization to organization, and from church to church, one hears a variety of mission statements.

When it comes to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of our Lord Jesus Christ, it ought to be a really simple exercise. We might say it in different ways, but essentially every church's mission ought to say this: 'We are here to make saints.' No other organization can do that. That's what the Church does, and only by the power of God the Holy Spirit. That's why we're here.

We make saints by new birth, baptizing sons and daughters by water and the Holy Spirit. We equip saints for the lifelong struggle to acquire Christlikeness. We teach saints to remember that they will die; to live at all times preparing for a holy death; to remain faithful and true until one's final breath. We are here to make saints—saints who love God more than anything or anyone in all creation; whose sole passion is to adore the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Feast of All Saints is that day set apart in the Christian year when we celebrate the gift of saints to the Church. When we confess the Apostles Creed, we say 'I believe in the communion of saints.' Tonight we renew our hearts and minds with the truth that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We are not alone. We remember saints who have fallen asleep in Christ, who departed this life and await the resurrection of their bodies.

Anglicans have a liturgical calendar filled with saint days and commemorations—from St Anthony and St Agnes in January, to St Benedict & St Gregory of Nyssa in July, to St Lucy and St Stephen in December. All through the year we celebrate individual saints. But today is the Feast of *All Saints*. We thank God for saints recognized and canonized; for saints ignored, forgotten, and unknown. It means the saints who inspire you and the saints who irritate you. We do not romanticize saints as heroes

with no flaws. I've benefited greatly from St Ignatius of Loyola, but who's to say if I had been alive in 16th century Spain he wouldn't have gotten on my almighty nerves?

St Gregory the Great was one of the earliest saints who well understood the array of temperaments, the varieties of strengths and weaknesses, among the saints. I've described the final section in Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* as an ancient Christian version of Myers-Briggs. Gregory gives pastoral instructions to priests about how one ought to advise all kinds of temperaments and conditions:

- ❖ the bold and the modest
- ❖ the forward and the timid
- ❖ the meek and the easily provoked
- ❖ those who do not speak enough and those who speak too much
- ❖ the impatient and the patient

As it was from the church's beginning, is now, and will be until Christ returns—the saints are not uniform, yet they are united in Christ. Uniformity means we must look the same; unity means we are bonded to a common source of life.

According to tradition, St Hermas was one of the seventy disciples of Christ, and he received this vision. Hermas saw angels constructing the city of God, the new Jerusalem, and noticed the angels selected square stones with sharp edges and placed them next to one another, cementing them together. Other stones, beautiful and round, were rejected. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom comments on this vision saying,

When we try to create a society in which every one of us is safe from the other, are we not creating a society of people who are like smooth, rounded stones that can in no way be fitted together with others? What is needed then is a hammer that will break the smoothness and reshape them.¹

We need the Spirit to make us saints—not uniform saints, but saints who fit together as the body of Christ.

The saints are united in their pursuit of becoming holy, becoming like Jesus. The call of holiness goes out to all who are baptized in Christ. Whether it was Abba Moses who repented of his life as a vigilante and gang leader to become a monk, or St John Chrysostom who renounced his privileged life and life in politics to be a priest and bishop for the poor—God leads his saints in the way of holiness.

Whether a saint becomes known around their world or if they're only known by a church family that averages 30 people a Sunday; whether they are remembered and commemorated for centuries or whether their descendants fail to honor their memory, this feast remembers *allsaints* who fell asleep in the faith of Christ. We remember the saints because that's the work of Jesus in his Church—we make saints.

Of Humility

On All Saints Day, we read the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. The words of blessing. This is how the sermon begins, this is how life in Christ begins for every saint—we begin life

¹ *Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Churchianity and Christianity, 114-115.*

in Christ hearing a word of blessing. Not a word of shame or judgement, but a word of blessing. The first word is a word of blessing.

And yet these are strange blessings. Blessings for the poor in the spirit; those who mourn; the meek and merciful; for those who are persecuted, for those who suffer insults and evil in the Name of Jesus. These can only be blessings for saints whose citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus speaks the word of blessing to bring encouragement and comfort now. Yet the future promises also suggest these are virtues we must pursue—to pursue the way of mercy, to hunger and thirst after righteousness, to become peacemakers, to cultivate purity of heart.

The Beatitudes are beautiful and holy. And they bring you to your knees. They bless the saints and humble the saints. I think that's a common thread through *all* the beatitudes—humility. God has made us with a wonderful variety of temperaments and personalities, yet we find common ground, common purpose in the call of humility. We find common ground when we are humbled, when we kneel together before the presence of Christ and his commands.

When you read the biographies and autobiographies of saints, many of these stories don't have grand, dramatic gestures at every turn. Many were humbled in weakness and, like our Lord, 'learned obedience through what they suffered.'² St Gregory Nazianzus likely suffered from depression, St Olympia most certainly did. St Therese of Lisieux wrestled with crippling fear. Before he became a voice for martyrs, the Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand suffered doubts in his faith while imprisoned in solitary confinement.

If there's a memorable anecdote, a quotable phrase, in a saint's story, it doesn't come in a spark of genius, but it's the fruit of lifelong repentance; of kneeling before the Lord in humility and prayer; of clinging to Christ day after mundane day.

The Cave of St Sava

You have never heard of Fr Nikodemos of Karyes, nor had I until two weeks ago. Before I was introduced to him, I saw him from a distance, in his garden, washing lettuce. I've rarely seen such a well-kept and immaculate garden. His greenhouse was picturesque. It's not good form to envy a monk, but that's me.

Our pilgrimage group had set out from the retreat house in Karyes early that morning to visit the Cave of St Sava, the patron saint of Serbia. We had a brief walk, but a steep ascent of probably a few hundred meters. Most monasteries we visited had 30+ monks, several buildings, with a vaulted basilica church, covered in frescoes of saints. That's what I was expecting when we set out to see the chapel of St Sava.

Instead I saw a monk washing lettuce, changing from his garden clogs to his regular shoes to greet his pilgrim guests. Our guide, a Serbian Orthodox Christian, explained to us that Fr Nikodemos is the only monk inhabiting this cell. He might have the assistance of a novice for his prayers or his garden work, but the lion's share of the work is Fr Nikodemos' alone. We then learned that the monastic rule for the cave of St Sava has existed for 800 years and consists of the most extreme spiritual effort among the monks of Mt Athos.

² Hebrews 5.8

A monk who dwells in this cave vows to read all 150 psalms *everyday* and read all the Gospels every week. Our guide told us that Fr Nikodemos not only prays all 150 psalms everyday, he reads the Gospels for three hours every day *on his knees*. He sleeps only a few hours every night. This has been his daily habit for 30 years. Did I mention that his garden also looked like paradise?

When I had the great privilege of shaking this monk's hand, I knew I had met an awesome saint of the church. He was humble and his spirit was light and joyful. Here's a little Kingdom math for you: humility + joy = glory.

You've never heard of Fr Nikodemos until today and he prefers it that way. That's the heart of All Saints Day. We celebrate holiness in the saints of Christ, known and unknown to us. We celebrate that the ordinary, daily habits of holiness impart the grace of Christ within us. We must co-operate with grace and become great saints because we have been given such a great redemption in Christ. You and I are not called to the kind of extreme effort of Fr Nikodemos; that is God's will for his life, not ours. But we are called to the same humility, the same posture in our life of prayer and worship—to kneel before the Lord, depending on Christ for every ounce of strength to be faithful.

Closing

This may well be the only All Saints Day we will have worshipping in the Parish Hall. And why are we here? Because we're renovating this church—and the nave and sanctuary, most of all, to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Since September, we've gathered for worship here and steadily you've seen more improvements. New ceiling panels await installation in the back, new seating arrived, stained glass windows are now installed in the nave and visible from the outside. And yet I believe the most important addition we have are places to kneel. We have kneelers in these new chairs recently arrived. The new pews in our nave have kneelers. We have an altar railing installed in the nave where you will kneel to receive communion very soon. This material construction—installing kneelers—is the outward sign of the inner truth we believe about the essence of a saint—a saint is one who kneels, who learns the way of humility, who depends on Christ for life itself.

This is the work of Christ in his church—the church makes saints. Saints are made by water and the Holy Spirit. Saints are made by kneeling and learning the pattern of Christ in holy humility. Saints are always preparing to die well. For our souls long to hear at the end of our days, those words that we believe by faith our fathers and mothers have already heard from our Lord Jesus, 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master.' So glorify the Lord, all you his saints, and adore today our God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.