APOSTLES ANGLICAN CHURCH
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All Saints' Day 2026
(Ecclesiasticus 44:1-14 / Ps 149 / Rev 7:9-17 / Mt 5:1-12)

Let us pray.

> O God, you have brought us near to an innumerable company of angels, and to the spirits of just men made perfect: Grant us during our earthly pilgrimage to abide in their fellowship, and in our heavenly country to become partakers of their joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen*.

The only real sadness,
the only real failure,
the only great tragedy in life,
is not to become a saint (Leon Bloy, The Woman Who Was Poor).

Several years ago now, I stood by the bedside of a dear friend and led his wife and son and daughter-in-law in the prayers *At The Time of Death*. Such a space is always a thin place — holy ground on which you should remove your shoes. Such a moment is alway *kairos*, God's season, time in its holy dimension and fullness. Such a room at such a time always feels — and it is — crowded with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.

Later that same evening, as I sat talking with his wife — now his widow — she said, half in jest and half in real question: "Well, I guess he's a saint now." Sometimes it is not always clear what to say in the moment, but I sensed she needed more comfort than doctrinal precision. So, I talked around an answer, using too many words to fill the theological vacuum of her loss. What I wish I had said, briefly and clearly, is this: "Is he a saint now? Neither more nor less than he was yesterday." But then, I would have needed this homily to explain.

I realized that night, and have pondered off and on in the years since, that we are, most of us, somewhat muddled in our thinking about the saints. As much as anything, there is a disconnect between our heads and our hearts, between our personal piety and our common theology. We know less than we would like to know, and what we do know is almost too wonderful and far beyond our comprehension; it amazes us and blesses us, but only if we have the audacity to believe it. Let us have the audacity to believe it.

My friend for whom I offered last rites was a good-natured curmudgeon, a devil's advocate who would argue with a fence post just for the sport of it. Like his frugal Scottish forebears he could pinch a penny until it screamed for mercy, and he could

give generously of his goods and his time and his love. He could make you angry and he could make you laugh in about equal measures. He was a faithful member of a local Episcopal church — the parish where my family learned the Anglican way and where my daughter was baptized on All Saints Day twenty-five years ago. I never could tell whether he was really disturbed by the direction The Episcopal Church was headed or not, but, if so, he was not disturbed enough to leave. I know he loved his local parish. He had lived an interesting life, but he was, in all the best ways, quite ordinary; you would have overlooked him in a crowd. He was a gifted and a flawed human being, and as difficult as it was to believe sometimes, he was a saint.

It is easy to believe in saints when we are surrounded by them in Scripture: Peter, Paul, James, John, Stephen to mention just a few. It is easy to believe in saints when we hear the stories of the faithful of ages past, and especially the stories of the martyrs, as we celebrate their feast days. It is easy to believe in saints when we sit in silent prayer in the stained glass filtered light of a cathedral or monastery or of our own nave, or when we see the rather stern faces of the saints in icons. It is a bit harder to believe in saints at the DMV, in line at Walmart, or staring with disgust at the paid political advertisements on television and at the candidates who endorse those messages. It can even be hard — as no less than C. S. Lewis acknowledges — to believe in saints in the pews around us: the man in the squeaky, muddy boots; the woman who sings just enough off key to make angels weep; the old couple who does little but complain about … well, about pretty much everything. Of course, I'm talking here about other churches, not Apostles! And it is *most* difficult to believe in saints when looking in the mirror at a face we know only too well, when looking inward at a heart that we know contains dragons. Me a saint? It is hard to believe.

As difficult as it sometimes was to believe, my friend was a saint: not by virtue of his death, but by virtue of his birth, that is, by virtue of his re-birth in the water of baptism. The Church deems four days especially appropriate for the Rite of Holy Baptism. One is All Saints Day, and there is theology abounding in that pairing. The simple but profound truth is this: the Church gives birth to saints in baptism; the true canonization of all saints happens not as the result of some ecclesiastical commission investigating purported miracles, but rather as once dead people emerge dripping wet from the water of baptism, as they are anointed with chrism and claimed by Christ as his own forever. In that water they are qualified to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. They are delivered from the power of darkness and conveyed into the kingdom of the Son, in whom they have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins (cf Col 1:12-14). Every sinner buried with Christ in baptism is raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised his Son from the dead. Every sinner has entered the water dead in his trespasses and exited the water alive and forgiven of all his sin. The Church gives birth to saints in baptism. And here this day — thanks be to God — through water and Word, by faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church will birth four new saints: Catherine, Edie, Mabel, and Sophia. They will take their places in the long line of saints gone before and in the long line of saints to come should our Lord tarry. The Church gives birth to saints in baptism.

The Church nourishes saints in Word and Sacrament, through the proclamation of the Gospel and through the great Eucharistic feast of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Church gathers the saints around the altar and around the throne of God — with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven — as we, saints all, forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of his name: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. The Church trains saints in faithfulness and service, in askesis and repentance and prayer. The Church commissions saints in confirmation and ordination. The Church accompanies saints in singleness and in marriage, in childbirth and in adoption, in sickness and in health, in confession and in absolution. The Church prays at the bedside of dying saints, like my friend, and sings *Alleluia* at the graves of those same saints. The Church buries Saints in the sure and certain hope of their resurrection. And the Church continues in communion with those saints who have gone ahead to a different shore and who now see in a greater light.

The Church gathers saints in the darkness of Holy Saturday, in the very shadow of the cross and tomb, gathers them in the darkness to kindle new fire — the light of Christ — gathers them to proclaim to all the now defeated fallen powers the great Paschal shout: Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

There are Christians who suffer and die for the faith, and the Church rightly remembers them. There are Christians who lead lives of self-sacrifice and heroic virtue, and the Church rightly emulates them. There are Christians who face hardships for the sake of advancing the Gospel at home and abroad, and the Church rightly honors them. And there are Christians who muddle through — struggling to be faithful, spiritually falling down and getting up again, going to work and coming home again, raising families and paying bills, being wounded and forgiving, wounding and seeking forgiveness, praying and forgetting to pray, wondering sometimes if the great Story is really true after all and hoping fervently that it is, clinging to it with all the strength they have, with all the grace God supplies, wagering everything that it *is* true. The heroic and the ordinary: saints all — birthed in baptism and nourished in the Church.

We marvel at the unveiling of the saints in the *Revelation*:

> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Rev 7:9-10).

And we are not surprised when we learn that they have come “out of the great tribulation...[and] have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14*b*): the martyr saints. We would not be surprised to find Blandina among them — Saint Blandina — the young slave girl executed with the other martyrs of Lyon in 177 A.D. after suffering horrendous torture for the sake of Christ. We would not be surprised to find Kizito among them — Saint Kizito — the fourteen year old

Ugandan boy baptized in water on 26 May 1886 and martyred in fire on 3 June of that same year, just eight days after his baptism — Saint Kizito whose martyrdom became just one more seed in the great harvest known as the East African Revival. *These* are saints along with countless others known and unknown.

But what about a divisive, argumentative group of confused disciples struggling to leave idols and prostitutes behind, a group not quite convinced of the resurrection, a group who — on occasion — gets drunk at the Eucharist, a group whose members take one another to court and yet who boast, falsely, of their great spiritual gifts and wisdom? *These* are saints? Hear Paul, as he wrote to this group in Corinth:

> Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,
>
> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:
>
> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:1-3).

These are saints — these muddled, struggling Corinthians? Yes, "together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," together with you and me. Sainthood is not something *we* do, but something our Lord Jesus Christ does in and for us, both a finished work of the cross and an ongoing work of the Spirit.

But surely there is a difference between the heroic saints, the martyr saints now in heaven, those recognized and honored by the universal Church and those local saints in the pews next to us or walking the aisles of Walmart? Yes, there is a difference, but only in degree and not in kind. The saints in heaven and the saints on earth are one people, one body in Christ, one communion. We are saints still on pilgrimage to perfection; they are saints who have finished the race and who have been perfected by the once for all work of Christ on the cross who has kept them faithful until the end. They are the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, righteous spirits made perfect. And they surround us as a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on, encouraging us in our race:

> Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:1-2).

By the cross and in our baptism we have been made saints. By the indwelling presence and work of the Holy Spirit we are maturing as saints. And by the grace of

God, when at last we see Christ glorified — whether at our death or on the great day of his appearing — we shall be perfected as saints.

> See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:1*a*, 2-3).

This is the great mystery of *already / not yet*: already saints, already children of God, but not yet perfected, not yet fully as he his. So, we rejoice in our identity now, and we strive — empowered by the Holy Spirit — to purify ourselves as Christ is pure, to become what we are.

And, both the saints in heaven and the saints on earth live in hope and expectation of the culmination of all things: judgment and vindication, resurrection, New Jerusalem, the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven:

> Then the angel showed me the river of water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (Rev 22:1-5).

On this day we gather as the saints on earth, with the saints in heaven, in one communion in two places, looking forward to that day when we shall gather in one body around the throne, to see the face of our Lord and to worship our God forever and ever.

The great hymn *For All the Saints* — written by Anglican Bishop William Walsham How — expresses all this faithfully and beautifully. With its words, I close.

> For all the saints who from their labors rest,
> Who Thee by faith before the world confessed;
> Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
> Alleluia, Alleluia!
>
> Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might;
> Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;
> Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

But when there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of Glory passes on His way.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
In praise of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Alleluia, Alleluia! (*For All the Saints*, William Waltham How)