

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

WITH ALL THE SAINTS

A sermon preached the 6th of November 2016, the Solemnity of All Saints, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Ephesians 1: 11 – 23.

*For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
who thee by faith before the world confessed,
thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed.
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, the one true Light.
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!*

— William Walsham How, 'For All the Saints'

A wandering Aramean was my father.” Six words in English, they are but three in Hebrew [*arami oved avi*]. The words recited every Passover had been passed down in oral tradition for centuries when the historian of Deuteronomy recorded them. From the literature of ancient antiquity, there isn't an older line recited today by people giving witness to who they are. If you are a child of Abraham — and that was the punch line of last week's lesson, Jesus saying of Zacchaeus, “he too is a son of Abraham” — if you belong to that family, this is how you begin to answer the question *Who am I?* Read someone else's mail. Tell a story that doesn't begin with you. Speak of ancestors in the faith who've died. Somehow the story you tell ends up being your own. And that is how you begin to answer the question, *Who is God?*

Today we celebrate The Feast of All Saints, one of the five major feasts of the Church year, up there with The Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord, The Feast of the Holy Nativity, The Feast of the Ascension, and The Feast of Pentecost. In an age when people think the world begins with them, in a day when one charlatan or another wants you to believe the fate of the world resides in his or her hands, it is a peculiar feast Christians celebrate.

Not all do. Some are loathe to honor mortals. Not Mary who bore and raised the Savior of the world or Joseph who merely guarded and protected him. Not Polycarp or Monica or Alban or Thérèse of Lisieux. To

pinched piety all honor belongs to God alone; therefore we mustn't celebrate the saints and all faithful departed. God's finished with them, according to this way of seeing things. Why bother? They're done. They're yesterday. By the lights of such presentism, the only fellow soldiers we pray with and fight beside against Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness are people who happen still to be walking around. In this blinkered vision anyway.

What to do then with today's passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians? The Apostle prays for the faithful in Ephesus, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation . . . so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe . . .”

The hope to which Christians are called has to do irretrievably with the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints. This is not a spiritual add-on; not the way St. Paul writes about it it isn't. Neither is it a bit of idolatry smuggled into the Church. It's “the great cloud of witnesses” to use the language of the writer to the Hebrews, the choice vessels of God's grace in their several generations whose witness makes God credible. The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams put it this

way, “When we celebrate the saints, we celebrate those who have given evidence, who have made God believable by how they have lived and how they have died.” To commemorate the saints is to peer into your family album and learn something you need to know. And it is more than that. It is to receive a measure of God’s very glory and mighty power.

God’s power and glory are bound up in what God takes to himself. In the Middle Ages they used to say, “The greater the king the greater his court.” God is not parsimonious with his glory. The Most High doesn’t keep a paltry court.

The God whose story is told in “A wandering Aramean was my father” turns out, by his own choosing, to be the Blessed One attended by creatures of such burning splendor that we can scarcely imagine them: cherubim and seraphim, and angels and archangels, *and mortal men and women*. “In this throng,” writes Tom Howard, “are creatures who, beyond imagination, bear a dignity excelling that of the immortals. These are the ones of whom alone it is said that they were made in God’s image. This is not said even of the seraphim. . . [T]he mantle of their flesh is the mantle taken by God himself at His Incarnation. Most glorious mantle — no ermine, no purple, no cloth of gold, no robe of angelic light can match it.”

Later in this same letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, “I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith — that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

In these dependent, relative clauses the apostolic vision is clear: The love of Christ is not something we are vouchsafed to know apart from *all the saints*. The Captain

of our salvation marshals to our side angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven, fellow soldiers in the well-fought fight. In that mystic, sweet communion the Most High gives us courage and strength.

On the 23rd of February we commemorate Polycarp of Smyrna, one of my favorite saints. Polycarp was the elderly Bishop of Smyrna in the year of our Lord 155 when he was arrested by the Roman proconsul and brought on an ass to an arena. There the proconsul commanded him to renounce his faith in Jesus and swear fealty instead to the proconsul. To a *politician*. Imagine that.

At the entrance to the arena, he was transferred from the ass to a chariot. There two Roman soldiers who had no enthusiasm for seeing an old man die, said to him, “What harm would it be to say ‘Caesar is Lord’? Just do it, old man. Renounce your allegiance to Jesus.”

Polycarp did not answer them. They persisted.

He said, “I am not going to do that.”

They took him into the arena. There the proconsul asked him, “Are you Polycarp?”

“Yes.”

“Will you deny this Jesus whom you call Lord?”

Polycarp did not reply.

“Think about your age, old man. Swear by the fortunes of Caesar, and I will release you. Revile Christ!”

And Polycarp said, “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

The proconsul threatened. “I have wild beasts. I can burn you at the stake unless you repent.”

Polycarp said, “I am a Christian. What are you waiting for? Do whatever you wish to.”

They burned Polycarp at the stake.

“Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King, who saved me? I am a Christian. What are you waiting for?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen’s Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o’clock. For more information about our life and mission
please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501,
or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org.*