

Text: 2 Peter 3:8-14 (John 5:24-29, Isaiah 35:3-10) † Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

Looking Forward

In the name of him who is the resurrection and the life, dear friends in Christ: Yesterday, November 1st, was All Saints Day: the day on which the church remembers with thanksgiving the lives (and very often the deaths by martyrdom) of those people of God who, while on earth, served Christ, his church, and those in need with noteworthy devotion – and yet it seems, with not enough devotion to warrant having an individual feast day appointed in their honor like Sts. Peter, Paul, John, or Thomas. The observance of All Saints Day began sometime in the 7th century, but it really came into its own in the Middle Ages when the notion began to grow that these saints have special intercessory powers; that is, by virtue of the holy lives they lived on earth they're closer to God than the rest of us, so he's more likely to hear their prayers than ours. The idea is that if you want to hedge your bet on getting a prayer answered favorably, along with asking the Lord directly, you can also pray to the appropriate saint who specializes in the sort of matter under consideration with the understanding that he or she will put in the good word for you. In this way, the festival of All Saints came to be something of a "catch all". In some ways it was analogous to the *altar to the unknown god* in the city of Athens. You know the Greeks had many gods to appeal to, but it seems that some folks were afraid there might be one or more gods out there that they didn't know about. And in the off chance that they may have unwittingly offended that god and that that was the cause of their problems, they could offer sacrifices at this altar to the god whose name they did not know, and, hopefully, get him to lay off with the curses and all. The feast of All Saints worked pretty much the same way. It was a way to ensure that there weren't any saints up there feeling snubbed because no one ever called on them for assistance. And hey, getting prayers answered the way you want is dicey enough without having who-knows-how-many saints angry for being neglected running interference.

Naturally, we don't look at All Saints Day that way. We do not believe in offering prayers to saints, nor do we see any value in currying their favor – even if that were possible (and it's not). Instead, we understand that the Lord Jesus is more than sufficient an intercessor for us, and we know that our Father hears and answers our prayers for his sake alone. Nevertheless, we do observe All Saints to celebrate the lives of those who have gone before us and who have served with special distinction, both thanking the Lord for the grace he gave them for salvation in his Son, and also upholding them as inspiring examples of Christian life and virtue that we would do well to imitate.

Today, November 2nd, we take the idea a step further by observing a separate festival that we call the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. Yes, it's true that the church throughout history has gone through certain rather involved procedures to give the title "saint" to a fairly small number of God's people; but in our view that's both wrong-headed and unnecessary. We understand that all those who trust in the Lord Jesus for their salvation are the saints of God: for all who believe in him have been redeemed by his blood, all have been forgiven of their sins, and all have been sanctified (that is, "made saints") by the Holy Spirit who dwells within them. We further understand that all believing saints serve God faithfully in whatever roles or vocations they're in. You don't have to take an oath of poverty or celibacy, or be a missionary in India, or a great doctor and theologian of the church, or a martyr who refuses to deny the faith under torture in order to serve the Lord with distinction. Such things impress us; but the fact is that the person who, in faith, raises food for people to eat, or helps cure them when their sick; plumbers, carpenters, police, clerks, accountants, (maybe even lawyers), all *useful* occupations anyway, to include the mother who feeds and cares for her children and

teaches them to walk and to tie their shoes, all are functioning as the hands of God to accomplish his good and holy will. All of them are the masks behind which the Lord cares for and upholds his creation. And to the extent that what they do is done in faith, their works are just as pleasing to the Lord as the most illustrious works of the apostles and prophets.

So today, the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, we remember all these unsung saints who have gone before us, who have finished their course in faith and now rest from their labors. It's entirely fitting that we thank God for the salvation he's given them in the Lord Jesus, and for their lives of faithful service; especially for those who touched our own lives most directly. I speak of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and mentors, baptismal sponsors, and, I don't know, maybe even a few pastors, who helped raise us in the faith and who played a part in making us what we are; and also spouses, siblings and friends, and yes, especially painful, in some cases children who, in their time with us filled our lives with happiness, and whom the Lord in his inscrutable wisdom called home to glory before us. Today's observance is for us an opportunity to remember them with a certain joyful thanksgiving that perhaps we couldn't experience at their funerals because the grief at losing them was then so overwhelmingly strong. But with time and the comfort of God's Word and Spirit, the Lord has softened initial sting of death so that, though still saddened by their passing, we can now look back at the cherished memories with deep gratitude.

But a certain amount of caution is in order as we do this. As much as we treasure the memories of those who have gone before us in faith, we don't want to fall into the trap of looking back with a longing desire to return to the good old days when they walked among us in this life. That's a formula for bringing upon yourself nothing but frustration and depression; because one thing you can never do is turn the clock backwards. It sometimes happens that people try to do this: they attempt to live in the past, believing that they are somehow honoring their departed loved ones by leaving their things exactly as they left them, or by speaking to them as if they could hear, or other similar sorts of things. It's like trying to pretend that your loved ones never died. In other cases, people feel that they are honoring their lost loved ones by staying in a constant state of mourning, brooding over the pain of their loss, and deliberately denying themselves the good gifts of God's creation. Both methods are ways to live in the present with the focus primarily on the past: either to the time before the death of their loved one, or the actual time surrounding the death. Needless to say, these kinds of behaviors aren't healthy, especially in a spiritual sense. At best they ensure that you stay sad and miserable; at worse, they make you bitter and resentful toward God.

Our loving heavenly Father wants us to be neither miserable nor resentful, nor does he want us to be forever pining away for days gone by. Rather, without forgetting the past, he would have us keep our focus forward. He wants us, when thinking about our departed loved ones, to look ahead. We see this clearly presented in the three readings we have for today. All three Scriptures look forward to that time in the future when all of God's saints, those on earth and those who have gone ahead, will be reunited in Christ Jesus in eternal glory. And more than just tell us *that* we should be looking forward, these Scriptures also tell us *how* best to do it.

First, we are to look forward with certainty. The words and promises of Jesus are crystal clear. "Whoever hears my word and believes in Him who sent me *has* eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." The statement is present tense. Those who trust in Jesus have eternal life right now. And the Lord elaborates, "The hour ... is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." He is speaking of spiritual life: people who are dead in sin are hearing Jesus' Gospel of salvation. They are being told of how he suffered and died for their sins, and how he rose again to declare

them free of sin's penalties – including death. And those who believe have been brought to life by his powerful word. If *you* believe, you have already experienced your spiritual resurrection. You *have* eternal life. “But do not marvel at this,” Jesus continues, “for an hour is coming when all who are in their tombs will hear [my] voice and come out.” Just as sure as you've had one resurrection in spirit, the Lord promises everyone on earth another in the flesh. And those whose spirits are alive in him will not be condemned.

Second, we are to look forward with patience. Two thousand years have passed since the promise was made, but St. Peter assures us that the Lord is not being negligent or forgetful – as it would seem people were already beginning to think in his day. No, we're told, the Lord has a plan and a purpose for the present time, and he is using it to accomplish his goals. Specifically, he's allowing time for the Gospel to go forth and bring more people to repentance and life. He's not willing that anyone should perish. But that doesn't mean it's completely open-ended. Some two thousand years passed between the time the Lord promised Abraham that the Messiah would come through his offspring and the time of the Savior's birth. We know that in that time many people gave up hoping that day would ever come. But, looking back at the record, we know the Lord was steadily unfolding his plan, putting everything in place, and when the fullness of time came, he sent his Son into the world. That's what he's doing now; and when the time of harvest comes, the Lord Jesus will return. And so, like farmers waiting for crops to ripen, we must be patient; but ripen it will.

Third, we are to look forward with appropriate priorities. Peter twice emphasizes that this present earth is passing away. It's going to be destroyed along with everything in it. The only thing, the *only thing* that's coming out of it in any positive sense are the people who trust in the Lord Jesus. My friends, think of it this way: we're on the *Titanic*, and we know what's going to happen. The ship is going down with everything on it. Knowing what's coming, what are you doing with your time? Are you polishing brass and arranging deck chairs? Are you improving your shuffleboard game? Or, everyday, are you making sure your life preserver is where you can find it, and that it fits properly? Are you showing a lot of interest in the lifeboats, and doing your best to ensure that others are too? Yes, deck chairs and cabins and even shuffleboard games have their places – but they rank low on the list compared to basic safety and survival considerations. We need to keep our priorities straight.

Fourth, we are to look forward with industry and activity. St. Peter asks, in view of what is to come, “What sort of people ought you to be?” Busy ones, he answers, busy doing the Lord's work. If you'll allow me a military illustration: folks in the service are placed on station for a definite period of time, usually two or three years. When their time is coming up for another assignment, naturally they begin to think about moving on. We used to call it “short-timer's syndrome”. And it manifested itself in two different ways. Sadly, for most soldiers, the symptoms of “short-timer's syndrome” included a lackadaisical, “couldn't care less”, “don't bother me, I'm not going to be around much longer” sort of attitude. They'd go to kind of half-speed mode and resist working on anything with long-term significance. Unfortunately, many soldiers started showing these dread symptoms as soon as they turned the halfway point on their assignments. Such soldiers were more liability to their units than help. But there was another kind of short-timer. That was the kind that displayed a sense of purpose and responsibility about their duties. They had definite ideas about what they wanted to accomplish in the little time they had left. These were the kind determined to leave their mark, as it were – and they knew they were the most qualified because they'd been around the longest. These folks were the most productive because they had a sense of urgency. And it's that sort of short-timer that we should be.

As a matter of fact, Peter indicates that doing so actually hastens the day of the Lord's coming. How? Well, in a relative sense we all know that time flies when you've got a lot to do and a limited amount of time to do it. But to be more precise, we've already heard what's delaying the Lord's coming: he's not willing that any should perish. He's allowing time for the Word to work its saving power in the world so that he can gather all his faithful people in the final harvest. The way we can hasten the day is by ensuring that his Word gets into the world: sharing the truth with our neighbors, teaching our children, growing in the Word ourselves, and supporting missions. We've plenty to do as we look forward to the Day of the Lord.

Fifth and finally, we are to look forward with *joy* and *hopeful expectation*. "But according to his promise, we are looking for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." Scripture is fairly vague about the glories and wonders that await us. The indication is that they are beyond our present ability to describe or to appreciate. But today's Old Testament reading gives us a few hints about what the perfect world to come will be like: death will be defeated, all physical ailments and limitations will be gone; the curse the earth itself carried on account of man's sin that caused it to bring forth thorns and thistles will be removed so that nature itself becomes friendly and hospitable – desert wastelands turning into well-watered gardens and so on. Above all, God's people – all God's people: those long dead, those who are alive now, and if the Lord wills it, generations yet to come – will live in perfect peace and harmony with him and with one another. "They will come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy will, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

That's what we have to look forward to. And that's the best way to remember the faithful departed: remembering that one day in the not-too-distant future we will be seeing them again with the Lord in glory. For our lack of trust, patience, and commitment, and for our failures to make proper use of the time we have left, may God grant us his forgiveness in Christ Jesus. And may he give us the grace to keep on looking forward, making every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with him while we make diligent use of time until that day comes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!