

The Festival of All Saints
5 November, Anno Domini 2017
St. Matthew 5:1-12
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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

At the end of an agonizing marathon race there is nothing more beautiful than that first glimpse of the finish line. It brings fresh energy and hope to the runner. It brings relief because it means that the end of the burning lungs and aching muscles is near. Every successful business advisor or life coach will tell you that you need to keep your goals and objectives squarely in front of you or you will be distracted and easily discouraged when you hit obstacles.

The vision given to St. John provides us with exactly that AND so much more. John's vision is about what will be and what IS, NOW. What John sees is actually the fulfillment of what Jesus proclaims in the Beatitudes. Both Jesus' preaching and John's vision are filled with comfort and hope for the saints of God. That comfort and peace is exactly what your heavenly Father wants you to find, to hear, to know. And one of the most wonderful things about what we have heard from Holy Scripture today is that these are present realities for God's people, not just something to look forward one day in the future. That is why today is called "ALL Saints Day". What Jesus teaches His disciples on the mountain top, what John sees, are both a then and a now.

Consider Jesus' words first. He doesn't say "Blessed will be the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek..." He says blessed "are", RIGHT NOW. Those who fit the bill ARE blessed this very moment. In the first and the eighth beatitudes, Jesus promises that the kingdom of the heavens already belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted. The remaining six describe future conditions that, in truth, are invitations to see as already fulfilled but not yet revealed to us who still must fight on the battle field.

Central to understanding these blessings, however, is making sure that we understand that the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, and so forth, aren't blessed because that's what they are, as though making yourself any of these things will bring you the reward. Completely strike from your vocabulary the supposedly ingenious notion that these are the BE-

attitudes. It may sound catchy and cute but it is horribly wrong. That idea is completely false and full of nothing but condemnation for anyone who honestly looks across the span of their life to see if they fit the bill. Sure, Jesus sitting there on the mountain top is very reminiscent of Moses receiving and giving the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai as it burned and smoked and the ground itself trembled at the judgment that followed on the heels of the Divine Law. But this is not Moses. This isn't Mt. Sinai. We don't need MORE of that. We don't need any more things to do or try to be. We have already failed at that. Jesus isn't a new Moses with a new Law to drive us deeper into hell.

But that's exactly what our sinful flesh wants this to be. We want this to be a another laundry list of things that we need to attain before we are blessed with eternal life. That's why what Jesus speaks is shocking and strange. Notice the flow of the beatitudes. The ones who are blessed are the ones who have nothing, who make no claim to anything. The kingdom of heaven belongs precisely to those who confess that they have no right to it, who confess that in no way do they deserve it. The poor in spirit mourn their sin, they hate that at every turn they find themselves plagued by anger, doubt, fear, lust, and a desire to do the very things that God teaches are evil and deadly to our souls. Those who mourn put up no front of pomp or arrogance. They don't try to delude themselves with the grandeur of their own wisdom or piety. They stand humbled before God as beggars who feel the weight of their sin and unworthiness, whose bowed heads betray the bowed hearts that are intensely and uncomfortably aware of their own perversity and guilt. They make no attempts to put on airs or pretend as though their sin isn't completely vile in God's sight. These hunger and thirst for righteousness because they have none. They know they are unrighteous, that they have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed. Those who are pleased with themselves, who vainly comfort themselves with their superior ethical behavior, who believe that their salvation is found in BEING these nine attitudes, de facto declare that they need nothing from God, that they aren't in need of the very thing Jesus has come to give them. Would any dare claim that they are pure in heart? Have you feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things? Have you been entirely satisfied with whatever joy or sorrow the Lord has seen fit and good to lay on you? Was it more important to you to maintain your friendships and keep the peace than speaking the truth in love about the salvation that is found only Jesus Christ given to us as a free gift? Are you a peacemaker, I mean a REAL peacemaker, true, divine, eternal peace? Have you freely

and completely forgiven all who have sinned against you? Have you laid aside every grudge and vengeful thought against those who hate and revile you, against those who have caused you physical or emotional harm? Have you gladly endured the hatred of the world, the loss of friends and family, because you confess Christ?

If the beatitudes are moral imperatives upon which your salvation hangs, there is no salvation for you. But when John looks out at the whole company of the heavenly congregation he doesn't see an innumerable host of morally superior people. He doesn't see people who have overcome all temptation and risen above sin. Who then, are these, standing in their white robes, around the throne of God, joining the angelic choirs in antiphonal hymns of praise? These are the ones whose warfare is over. They are now at rest from the labors of sin and fear. These are the ones who have washed their filthy, sin-stained robes in the Blood of God's Lamb. The blessed ones of heaven are those who wear the Baptismal wedding garment of Christ's righteousness given to them by the king. These are no longer tormented by the evil desires of their hearts. These no longer wrestle day and night against addictions. They stand among the host of heaven because God Himself has brought them safely there, through the mourning and the sorrow, through the weakness and the brokenness. When John looks, he sees sinners, an uncountable host of sinners, whose sins are covered by the Blood of Jesus. They don't worry any more about the safety of their family. They don't worry about which politicians are in power and what policies are working their way through the government. They have no more anxiety about job security and whether or not they will have enough to pay the bills. They are at rest. Their tribulation is over. John sees you. He sees all of God's children who have been delivered eternally from the battle strain. He sees the full revelation of what is real and true right now.

John's vision is granted so that we might know what awaits. Even though what we will be has not come to pass, even though we are still in the heat of the battle, we stand among that host, now. Through John you have been granted a vision of what will be, of the thing you long for. In mercy God has granted this vision to His children to strengthen you and give you hope. He sets the goal before you so that when you are wearied, when it feels as though the battle has been lost, you may lift up your eyes and see, your ears may be filled with the distant triumph song of heaven's Alleluias, of the saints loud Hosannas. We believe in ONE holy, Christian, and

apostolic Church whether it is already enjoying the rest of heaven or it is still the Church Militant fighting off the sieges of Satan's troops. You aren't just called sons of God. You are sons of God, children of the heavenly Father, whose heavenly Father will bring you safely to the fulfillment of all His promises to you. You have already washed your robes clean in the Blood of the Lamb, though you still wait, hope for, long for that day when you will lay down the weapons of war because it has been an extremely fierce and seemingly endless battle. But victory is certain. Jesus has risen from the dead. The dark veil that seems to hang over you as Satan and this sinful world seem to be advancing unchecked against God's Church will be lifted. The golden evening brightens in the west. Time is drawing to a close and soon Christ will return to grant to us who remain the rest we long for. That day is coming. You are not alone. You stand as one with all the saints who have gone before you in the faith - some whose names you know, some who are as close as your loved ones who have fallen asleep in the faith, the vast majority of whom you don't know now but whom you will have an eternity to meet.

But, remember, John's vision isn't just about some event that has yet to occur. This gathering of Christian Church, these legions of heaven's hosts, is NOW. There is a reason this scene sounds and feels so familiar. This very moment you are gathered around the throne of God and His Lamb with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. This is not some separate event merely foreshadowing what is to come. It IS what is to come! Though we may not see clearly with our eyes the glorious truth of who is with us, who is singing with us, and before whom we stand, it is no less true. What John described is happening right now. We are participating with ALL of God's saints in the Lamb's High Feast, gathering as one around the One Lamb and the One throne to receive and sing the praises of our salvation which belongs entirely to Him. The Divine Service is nothing less than this. It is no empty rehearsal. It is the real deal. It is the foretaste of the feast that is to come. What we celebrate here now in the midst of our tears, our sorrows, and our weakness, we celebrate with all of Christendom in heaven and on earth. Here the lines between heaven and earth, between faith and sight are blurred. Here the Lamb is in our midst to Shepherd us, to feed us and give us Himself, the food of eternal life. Here for a moment we gain a glimpse of what we will be. In the glorious day that awaits all tears will be wiped from our eyes. All our diseases will be healed. Every curse that sin has unleashed in this world, every bit of chaos and pain, every ounce of decay and death will be nothing

more than a faint memory, swallowed up by the joy of the One who stands before you this day to serve you, to shelter under the outstretched arms of His mercy. Here, in the bright light of Jesus, all the darkness of your sin, all the chaos of this sinful world is put to flight and hope rises before you. He who was Abraham's fortress, He who was David's strong rock of refuge, He is Your rock, your refuge. He has overcome death and hell. He has broken the chains of your slavery to sin. He stands triumphant on the battlefield, with the banner of Calvary's cross towering over the wrecks of time to give you hope, to strengthen your arms, to grant you courage that in Him, freshly nourished by the Body and Blood that have overcome all your enemies, you may persevere and enjoy the rest of that eternal day.

Dear Christian, you are blessed, the kingdom of heaven is yours because the king has claimed you as His own. Even now, this very hour, you stand in the presence of Your divine Monarch but not as a servant. Rather He is among you this day to serve you. To pour out His mercy, His love, and His comfort. To be sure, in this life, the kingdom of God lies hidden in weakness and humility. It will only be seen by faith. What your eyes see is an infant lying in a manger, a man nailed to a cross and pierced. You see only water. You taste only bread and wine. You hear only the voice of a broken sinner like yourself. But faith sees hidden under all this the true glory of God. You see God Himself working out your salvation. You see the victory of Christ over all your enemies. You see because you hear God Himself proclaiming "It is finished." You see because you hear His voice promising salvation in the waters of Holy Baptism and in the food of Holy Communion. You see and believe because you hear the voice of your heavenly Father. In the same way, who you truly are lies hidden, veiled. You are burdened. You suffer. You hurt. You experience sorrow and pain. You sin. People die, some very tragically and violently. The world continues to press the attack against Christ and Church and even seems to be gaining the upper hand. You suffer persecution because you dare confess Jesus Christ to be the Redeemer of the world. Rejoice because you have been given to see. You know the tomb is empty. You know the bars of hell have been forever smashed open. You know that God has made you His own beloved child and one day, what you truly are, what you long to be, will be revealed and your hope will have its fulfillment. One day you will join with every one of God's saints from every tribe, nation, people, and language and you will enjoy every blessing promised to all believers in Christ.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! Amen.

In the Name of +Jesus.