

## All Saints Day 2020

**Readings** - Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10, 22, 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12

**Introduction** - A Christian holiday always presents the preacher with a dilemma. Should we preach the Feast, or expound the texts provided by the lectionary for that day? This Sunday, focusing on both the Feast of All Saints and the lectionary works well together. This Feast raises the question about the nature of sainthood. Are saints those who are especially pious and close to God? Or, as the Reformers insisted are all genuine Christians saints, warts and all? This issue, which has long been argued in the last five hundred years, can best be addressed from a Biblical/Hebraic perspective.

**Common Theme** - In the Old Testament God's holiness intersects with objects, space, time and people. The robes of the high priest, the tabernacle, the sabbath and the priesthood are all declared to be holy (Hebrew root K•D•SH). Of course these are not intrinsically holy but only so because of their designation by God or connection to his redeeming work. Keeping this in mind prevents holiness from being confused with superstition or magic. At the same time God expected the people of Israel to "holy" themselves, the sabbath, and more.

### Hebraic Perspective -

- The sabbath is the first thing called K•D•SH/holy in scripture (Gen 2:3) and yet God instructs Israel to K•D•SH/make holy/sanctify the sabbath (Exodus 20:8).
- The people of Israel are designated as being K•D•SH/holy (Duet 14:2) and at the same time God commands them five times in Leviticus to be holy as he is holy (19:2).
- The name of the Lord is K•D•SH (Ezek. 36:23) and yet when Israel sees God's mighty work in their midst they are expected to K•D•SH that name. (Is. 29:23)

Holiness/sanctification is thus a partnership between God and his people. The New Testament shares this same understanding. We should be aware of this when we remember how Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "May your name be hallowed/made holy." (Matt. 6:9). Paul wrote to the dysfunctional church in Corinth that those found in Christ are holy (1 Cor.1:2) but at the same time he calls upon them to sanctify themselves/make themselves holy. (1Cor. 6:19-20; 2Cor. 6:14-7:1). Holiness is imputed and yet at the same time it is something that we as the community must do ourselves, though it is nothing we do alone or in our own power/flesh. Rather, it is the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16) in relationship with God that enables us to walk in a way that is pleasing to Him.

**Reading #1 - Revelation 7:9-17:** Four points are worth noting:

1. Saintliness/holiness and purity are closely connected in the Book of Revelation. A partial list:
  - The saints that have purified themselves stand before the throne in white garments (7:9-15).
  - The one that overcomes will be clothed in white (3:5).
  - The armies of heaven are clothed in fine linen, white and clean (19:14).
  - The bride of the Lamb has received a robe of pure linen—the deeds of the righteous (19:6-8).
  - Entrance to the New Jerusalem is only allowed to those who have the proper clothing (22:14).

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2. Martyrs are given white garments (6:11). Martyrdom was understood by Jews and Christians in late antiquity to be the ultimate sanctification of God's name (Kiddush Hashem). The practice of making God's name holy comes from the verse, "I will be hallowed/sanctified amongst the Children of Israel" (Leviticus 22:32; Mt. 5:16; I Peter 2:12). In addition to doing good works in imitation of God, it came to be understood (2nd-3rd century AD) by both Jews and Christians that the ultimate way of sanctifying the Name was by giving one's life (the most valuable of all we possess) for the Torah, in refusal to engage in idolatry, and for Christ.

3. This lectionary reading should be amended to include all of Rev. chapter 7. If the passage is read from verse 9 onwards "After this I beheld a great multitude of all nations..." it leaves out the Jewish people (which should be obvious as vs.9 begins "After this..."). We strongly disagree that the 12 tribes listed in vs. 1-8 is somehow a metaphor for the Christian community. Rather, it highlights the theme of the relationship between Israel and the Nations. From Genesis 12 onwards through Isaiah 19 and into the New Testament (including the Pauline corpus) the message of salvation from the Jews is for both Jews and Gentiles. The ethnic identity of these two groups remains distinct (Romans 11, 1Cor 7, Rev 7:1-8 and 9) although there is unity in the Messiah. The redeemed people of God have always comprised both Jews and Gentiles and this is beautifully portrayed if the whole chapter is read. (That this passage somehow speaks of some post-rapture Jewish conversion is unconvincing.) One more observation, this distinction between Jews and Gentiles is further exemplified by the description of the walls and gates of the eternal city. The foundations of the walls remember the names of the 12 Jewish apostles and the gates the 12 tribes (Rev. 21:12,14). Yet these walls and gates are not meant to keep out the nations. "And the nations which are saved shall walk in the light of [the holy city] and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it. The gates shall not be shut at all..." (21:24-26).

4. While the Reformers rightly opposed prayers to the dead, many Protestants today have forgotten that we pray with the dead. This understanding is first recorded by the Qumran community and by later mystical Judaism ... and the book of Revelation. It is said that worship unites heaven and earth (5:13) of those living, and those who have gone before us and stand before the throne of God and the Lamb. This reality is reflected every Sunday in the liturgy when we say, "...together with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven ..."

**Reading #2 - Psalm 34:1-10, 22:** This psalm is an acrostic poem, the verses of which begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Preaching this psalm can create a number of difficulties for the preacher and a short sermon is perhaps not the place to deal with questions of theodicy, i.e. grappling with why those who seek the Lord sometimes lack good things (v.10). This psalm can be referenced with other passages and used as to highlight ways in which God's people respond to God's care and provision. Note the verbs used to expressed gratitude: extoll, praise, boast, glorify, sought, taste, see and more. It can be emphasized that holiness brings benefits and blessing, verses 11-22.

**Reading #3 - 1 John 3:1-3:** This short but powerful passage gives provides the primary motivation for sanctification. It is the love of the Father that should stimulate us to holiness. We love him because he first loved us (1 John 4:19) and if we do actually love him it will be shown in the most practical and concrete ways. "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Love is primarily demonstrated in action and is not only an emotion or some mysterious force that will sweep us off our feet. The commandment most often emphasized in the Johanne

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corpus is love for one's brother. Failure to love means that we remain in death (1 John 3:15) and hatred of a brother is murder and no such person has eternal life (here defined a relationship with the Father and his Son, John 17:3). While ultimate transformation awaits us when we see him face to face, we now must partner with the life-giving Spirit by purifying ourselves. Again, this divine/human partnership in which we take part in the act of sanctification is needed in order to see the Holy One.

**Reading #4 - Matthew 5:1-12:** famous of all New Testament passages is an obvious choice for All Saints Day for at least two reasons, though one of which may not be so obvious.

1. The Beatitudes are the tangible picture of holiness or transformation that should be occurring in the life of Christians.
2. The key to this passage is found in verse 3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Many commentators agree that the overriding theme of the Sermon on the Mount is the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not merely a collection of high moral standards. The Sermon should never be preached/taught without the context of the Kingdom. The problem occurs when the listener connects the Kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus to a future event only (the Second Coming, heaven, eternal life, etc.).

**Hebrew Context:** The Kingdom of Heaven (euphemism for Kingdom of God, as Jews then and now avoid using God's name, as do we at times: "Good heavens"). The KOGod/Heaven is a technical term used by Jesus in at least three slightly different but overlapping ways. Matthew 5:3 uses this term in these ways.

1. In most instances for Jesus the KOG is the present reality of God exercising kingship in the lives of his creatures resulting in healing, deliverance, reconciliation, repentance and more. (Mt 12:28; Lk 9:1-6; 10:1-12; Mt. 10:1-16; 1Cor 4:20).
2. Jesus also uses the KOG as the community/movement that submits to him as king, bringing his redeeming power, deliverance, etc. (Mt 18:1-5; Luke 7:28)
3. In a few cases Jesus uses the term to talk about future events (Lk 22:16-17).

Note: "For theirs is the Kingdom of God." Obviously, God's Kingdom is not owned by anyone, even by the poor in spirit as this passage might seem to say. A better translation of Matt 5:3 would be "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for of them/they comprise the KOG."

"Blessed is the man" is a Hebraism (found throughout both OT and NT) most famously known from this passage and also Psalm 1, "Blessed is the man who walks not ... or stands ... or sits ..." describing the actions a blessed man takes.

The Israeli New Testament scholar David Bivin suggests that the Beatitudes are a complex version of Hebrew Parallelism (a Hebrew literary device) expounding on what it means to be poor in spirit, should there be any doubt. Thus, to be poor in spirit and participate in His redeeming community, is defined by Jesus as being meek, merciful, peacemakers, pure in heart, hungry for righteousness, those being insulted and persecuted. (The term was used similarly by the Qumran community.)

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### ACNA Addendum

**Psalm 149:** This psalm is part of Jewish morning prayer. After a short blessing, the daily Hallel (Ps 145-150) begins the service with these psalms of exuberant praise. Psalm 149 celebrates the Lord who takes pleasure in his people who are humble (v. 5) and faithful (v.6). The Lord is committed to his people and acts to bring them victory. While this psalm celebrates Israelite military prowess (empowered by worship) today we should consider the place of praise and worship in the context of humility and faithfulness as a part of our spiritual warfare and intercession.

**Ephesians 1:15-23:** The book of Ephesians is quite often approached as a theological treatise especially when it comes to preaching its beautiful first chapter. The preacher should keep in mind that this letter has a specific context—Paul’s gospel mission to the Gentiles given him by the Lord Jesus. “I have appeared to you for this purpose ... to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:16-18).

It seems best then to enter our text by backing up to Ephesians 1:1. Here Paul addresses the Gentile community as saints/holy ones. They share equally in Israel’s holiness by faith in the Messiah, bringing believing Gentiles the benefits that were once reserved for Israel: election, sonship, the Holy Spirit, and more. This is re-emphasized in chapter 2 where the Gentiles are reminded that at one time they were without hope and without God in the world. And yet Paul insists that they, whom he regards as holy people (1:4), should separate themselves from a long list of sins (5:3–5), and “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11). This interactive relationship between God and his people enables the church to be “holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27).