

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
All Saints 2022 – Year C

RCL Readings – Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

ACNA Readings – Ecclesiasticus 44:1-14; Psalm 149; Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction. The Feast of All Saints, also known as All Saints Day, continues to be celebrated in both Western and Eastern Churches. The origins of All Saints is found in the early church. The early church was a persecuted church and the early history of the Jesus movement is replete with stories of martyrdom. In the 4th century, the newly legalized church took it upon themselves to commemorate and remember the former heroes of faith with a special feast day. The martyrs and their sacrifice were not to be forgotten.

Common Theme. The world doesn't think too highly of the good news of Jesus and sometimes less so of his followers. It's an interesting paradox to note that people who don't believe in God seem to hate him so much. Jesus didn't hide the fact that his followers would face opposition and prepared them for the ultimate sacrifice. Our readings today offer us hope that any persecution we endure is not in vain. The Lord will reward the faithful and continue to expand his kingdom.

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18. Daniel is an amazing example to us of how to serve faithfully in a secular world. Following the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel is forced into servitude to the lords of Babylon, the great empire of the day. Obviously for Daniel and the Jewish people, this is not only an incredible psychological and sociological shock to the system, but also a theological one. The temple was destroyed; the priesthood and sacrificial system were gone. The prophets had prophesied victory, but they had deceived the people who were now enslaved in a strange land. One could have argued that the Lord had abandoned his people. And yet Daniel does not relinquish his faith in God at all, and he faithfully serves four pagan emperors without any hint of rebellion. Daniel receives dreams and visions in which the secular kingdoms of the world are seen as beasts. The beasts are terrifying and destructive. History has demonstrated a consistent persecution from the secular and pagan world to the people of God, both Jewish people and Christians. Daniel received a prophecy that declares that – following the fall of the four beasts – it will be the 'saints', the holy people, who receive the kingdom. This is a vision of hope to those who are suffering and downtrodden. The hope is a call to endure this present suffering for there is a promise of reward to inherit and partake of the true kingdom. The secular world, typified by these four beasts will pass away but the kingdom of heaven will endure forever.

Psalm 149. The last five psalms in the Book of Psalms are unattributed and without titles, simply known as the Hallelujah psalms for their call to 'Praise the Lord' at the beginning and end of each song. Psalm 149 opens with the call for the saints, the *hasidim* (חַסִּידִים) in Hebrew, to sing a new song to the Lord. Included in the new song of worship is acknowledgement of our Creator and his kingship. When we are not sure of how to worship the Lord or what to say to God, then a good place to start is to give him glory for his creation and acknowledge his rulership. The worship involves dancing and musical instruments which are expressions of joyful praise. While most of the secular world does not hold humility as a desirable attribute, the psalmist reminds us that God takes delight in his people and brings salvation to the humble. The word *humble* can also be translated as *meek*.

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How does this salvation come about as we are not talking here about messianic deliverance from sin? Jesus reminds us in the beatitudes that the meek have a special place in the future kingdom as they “inherit the earth”. Salvation has both a spiritual and physical component to it. The last four verses describe how the Lord defends his people by taking vengeance on the Gentile nations for their disobedience to God and persecution of his godly people. Even kings and rulers are not immune to the judgment of the Lord. Interestingly the last verse describes this judgment as an honour to the saints. How does God executing his justice on the secular world bring honour to his people? I suggest that salvation is seen in the Bible as both physical and spiritual and so perhaps in the time of judgment the nations will know that we chose rightly in following the Lord. Vengeance belongs to the Lord, and he chooses to defend and honour his saints through righteous retribution.

Ephesians 1:11-23. In writing to the Ephesians, Paul declares openly that the Gentiles are now part of the holy people of God. In the kingdom of heaven, the term “all saints” includes both Jews and Gentiles! Gentiles are also “chosen” and “predestined” and “included in Christ”, that is they are not replacing Jewish people but being included in the “commonwealth of Israel” along with the chosen people. The phrase “we who were the first to put our faith in him” (v. 12) speaks of the Jewish believers who are now joined by the “you also” (v. 13) who are the new Gentile followers. The community in Ephesus is not an inward-looking church; Paul tells us he praises the Lord for their “love of all the saints”. This is the true model for all God’s people. We should not only have love for the Lord but very importantly a love for all of the Lord’s people. 1 John 4:20 puts it bluntly but truly: If someone says, ‘I love God’ but hates his brother, he is a liar. On All Saints Day, we take the time to focus our concern towards the persecuted church of today. In terms of numbers, the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity and the Vatican both claim between 90,000 and 100,000 Christians are killed for their faith every year. These are our brothers and sisters who are also chosen and predestined, and they shouldn’t be forgotten. If we know of persecution and fail to speak out, what does that say about us?

Luke 6:20-31. The Gospel passage for All Saints is a section of Luke often titled the Sermon on the Plain. This is to distinguish it from Matthew’s well-known Sermon on the Mount. The key teaching material in both sermons have distinct parallels with each other and so it is likely that Jesus taught this material on several occasions and in slightly different ways depending on his context, location and audience. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is directing his teaching towards his disciples after he has chosen his special 12 apostles. In almost a summary form, Jesus instructs his followers on how they should live and behave. This is how the saints are to act in the world. Jesus begins by describing who is blessed in the kingdom of heaven, and immediately we note its counter-cultural message. The poor are the ones who are blessed! This is not to say that wealth is not a blessing from God, because it is that too. In Matthew there is the addition of ‘poor in spirit’, but here in Luke, Jesus has the literal poor in mind. The word ‘blessed’ *makarios* (μακάριος) in Greek, carries the meaning of happiness behind it. The world is not always a happy place for rich or for poor. One of the hallmarks of followers of God is their ability to find contentment in all things, to consider small things to be a blessing and to be happy in times of lack. Jesus continues his teaching to describe a community that is blessed despite persecution, hatred, sorrow and poverty. Unlike Matthew’s version of the sermon,

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People All Saints 2022 – Year C

Luke includes a section of woes which highlights further the paradoxical message of the Gospel. The world would not normally consider riches, emotional and food security as a 'woe'. The word 'woe' in Greek (ὄναι) isn't a threat but a primary exclamation of grief, like saying 'alas'. Jesus is teaching his disciples that sometimes the biggest obstacles to entering the kingdom of heaven are the things the world thinks are actually blessings. He also instructs his followers to accept the evils that are perpetrated against them (and us) by turning the cheek and loving our enemies. It's a difficult thing to put into practice, and we have the Holy Spirit to assist us to enact it, but it is possibly the greatest witness we can give to the world. The followers of Jesus simply act and react differently to the world system, and this love will be attractive to people. The example of the saints that have gone before us – those that chose lives of service to others, poverty over riches and suffered persecution at the hands of opponents to the Gospel – show us the effects of putting the teachings of Jesus into practice. Tertullian said famously that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The good news is that death is always turned into life. The counter-cultural message of the Gospel offers hope, light, and life to a world that sorely needs those right now.

ACNA Readings

Ecclesiasticus/Ben Sira 44:1-14. The background of Ecclesiasticus bears reading because of its near certain date (c. 200 BCE), the existence of a signed copy, and the perspective it gives on Greek ideas flowing into Judaism in the two centuries before Jesus. It is wisdom literature that captures traditional Jewish ideas as well as some ideas from Greek virtue literature. Chapters 1-43 are classic wisdom literature with moral advice and common sense consistent with canonical texts. Among the ancient churches, Ben Sira is considered canonical, among early Reformation churches deuterocanonical or useful but not canonical, by the balance of evangelicalism to be ignored, and as non-canonical throughout Judaism.

Beginning with chapter 44, which is our text, the author (or his grandson serving as a posthumous editor) adds a section of praise to God and in honour of great men. For purposes of the lectionary texts for the Feast of All Saints, it can introduce the value of remembering the contributions of those who have gone before in faith and obedience (even in the Hebrew Bible) or serve as a sharp contrast to the text from Revelation. Ben Sira offers no hope of resurrection, a fact that could indicate that he was theologically a Sadducee. Of note is the preference he shows for the unknown faithful (44:9-14) who have disappeared from memory but whose faithful, righteous, and humble lives shaped the future. Highlighting those verses as a segue to the passages from Revelation and Matthew reveals a divine bias to the humble who seek to serve him not their own reputations.

Psalm 149 (BCP 2019 translation). The text will probably not be used as the primary preaching text, as most preachers will want to avoid its imprecatory verses 6b-9, although that is not an excuse for avoiding it. Verses 1-6a are totally appropriate for worship, poetically offering praise to the Lord. The opening verse is widely remembered down through the history of the church. Two phrases are of particular note and are consistent within both Old and New Testaments. Verse 4b states, the Lord

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
All Saints 2022 – Year C

gives “victory to those who are oppressed” which will be fulfilled when the time of Revelation 7 is realized in history.” The other, verse 5b, “let them rejoice upon their beds” opens a portal into teaching on personal praise and its ability to address anxiety and fear. It seems that anxieties arising in the night are a widespread human plague down the ages.

For purposes of worship, it is classic in its construction in that the second half of each verse restates the first half. This makes it especially good for antiphonal worship, with one side of the congregation responding or replying to the other whilst simultaneously offering praise to the Lord. It lends itself to a musical setting.

Revelation 7:9-17. Most preachers will automatically identify the archetypal allure of the text. It speaks to the deepest desire of human beings for goodness, the defeat of mortality, the triumphal ending of the tests of human life, and the often-unacknowledged desire to live in the safety of a perfectly just and loving monarch/parent. If this text is the main preaching text, ignoring these deep longings in the application or conclusion would not do justice to the text.

Depending upon the approach, the text falls into two or three parts. The poetic verse 12 is worthy of exegesis in its own right, but it can also serve as a segue between the parts of a two-point sermon. Alternatively, setting the Ecclesiasticus text in contrast to Revelation 7:13-17 could produce a response that leaves the congregation departing rejoicing for all they have received through Jesus’ eternal work of grace and reconciliation. (This is one of those times when the preacher should guide the worship leader. The hymns and contemporary songs that celebrate the theme of this text should bring the congregation truly into the presence of the Lord.)

But it may be that current troubles in the world point to a clear exegesis of verses 13-17 that could do three things: 1) strengthen and prepare the church for trouble, discrimination, and persecution. 2) highlight the magnificence of Messiah the Lamb, and the hope of a tearful world that needs no more tears. The application could be connecting the sermon to the final paragraph of the Gospel text, finding joy and peace in trouble rather than fear, frustration and a need to vilify non-Christians who have no biblical frame of reference. i.e. “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you....”

Matthew 5:1-12. This may not be the time to fully exegete the text of the Beatitudes, but if that is your intent then *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard may be the best resource. A few notable characteristics of this text are 1) the worldview of Jesus’ signature teaching contrasts so sharply with contemporary views and norms, 2) the attitudes and behaviours are other-worldly and only available to the saints who are empowered by the Holy Spirit, and 3) a case can be made that these behaviours are designed to ameliorate the symptoms of ‘fallen-ness’ abroad in the world. They are arguably the character traits of an advanced disciple. Therein may lie the seed for the best application.

In keeping with Charles Spurgeon’s admonition to “preach with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other”, this writer would opt for clear and unapologetic defence of the messages of both Matthew and Revelation as regards faith behaviour of disciples. We dare not think the behaviour of

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
All Saints 2022 – Year C

those in thrall to the Enemy of our souls is anything other than normal when the church has failed to be “salt and light”. Of special note are current Western fears of persecution while in places like Nigeria, China, and Myanmar the real thing occurs. In Myanmar recently, some pastors have been kidnapped and others assassinated.

Hebraic Roots. Any preacher can find the Hebrew Bible texts that feature almost all the verses that are core teachings of the Beatitudes. Verse 17 could be wrongly read to support the view that Jesus planned to perpetuate the Mosaic Covenant. The Greek *ple-roo* ' is usually translated *fulfil*. Some translators prefer the phrase *interpret properly*. If this view is correct, it sustains the following passages that call for a sincerity of heart that appears throughout the Old Testament but is obscured by first-century Jewish views. All of these verses look to a deferred, next-world reward. The contrast can be seen between this text and what is on offer in Ecclesiasticus. Jesus' teaching following verse 10 are interpretations of Old Testament ethics and faith dependent upon internal, unseen disciplines that exceed the outward behaviours that characterized the orthopraxy of Jesus' day.

There are apocalyptic and eschatological texts from the Second Temple Period, but their importance can be easily overstated. The sense of oppression that drove a desire for the coming of Messiah and its apocalyptic implications cannot. The dream of independence was destroyed with the coming of Rome. Servitude to Rome was a daily spiritual offence. Any exegesis should take the imagery that prophesies against Rome as well as the prophetic truth that applies to all the times that disciples of Jesus will be persecuted.

The Feast of All Saints has become essential in the contemporary climate where the church must repent (like the seven churches of Revelation) of sloth and subtle idolatry and prepare for yet another, probably bloody, season of spiritual and temporal warfare.

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About the ACNA author. The Rev. Canon Daryl Fenton assumed the role of executive director for CMJ in Israel in 2019 after having served in the same capacity for CMJ's USA branch. Cn. Daryl previously served as canon to Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican Church in North America, overseeing mission relationships. He also served as canon and chief operating officer for the Anglican Communion Network, a founding organization of the ACNA. He continues to serve the current archbishop, the Most Rev. Foley Beach, as Canon for the Middle East. Daryl is married to Sandy. They have two grown children, as well as three grandchildren. The Fentons reside in Jerusalem, Israel.