

All Saints' Sunday
Nov. 6, 1988

Isaiah 26:1-21:
(various verses)
Rev. 21:9 - 22:5
Mat: 5: 1-12

All Saints' Sunday is a day when we thank and praise God for our communion with one another. We will be singing, "O blest communion, fellowship divine, we feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Alleluia!"

And in this communion we are participating in a fierce struggle... and how inadequate we feel to its accomplishment. And when we see a few results we praise God in the words of Isaiah: "In truth all our works are thy doing, O Lord, our God."

Looking at your children as a mother as a father, you see the struggle involved to bring them up. To deal with them in love, "to teach them the right as God gives us to see the right"(Abraham Lincoln), to have them and let them go, and how feeble we feel in this struggle, and how much we have to place our hearts into an utter trusting of God in order to see them through.

But don't look at the children alone, look at us. We ourselves need to grow in faith and maturity. We need to experience the new pregnancy by Gods' word. We need to experience the contractions brought on by the suffering that is our new birth. We have to grow up and mature in the faith, life and love of God, becoming the witnesses, sharing the good news, proclaiming the greatness of our God.

What a sigh we breathe when we consider what our children will have to go through, and what a sigh the Holy Spirit heaves in us, when we consider what we have to go through in order to enter the light and become part of the fellowship divine that one day will in all glory shine.

What a vision we could paint of the glorious saints, of a heavenly city, of a glorious congregation. Just to fill in some of the colors for our congregation: we could hear a mighty choir singing their way into our hearts, melting them, that our tears soak our robes, and prepare our hearts for the way God would have us go. The heavenly tones of a pipe organ would fill our worship, and the congregation would take its stand, crowding the entrances, because no more seats would be free in the house. The martyrs in our midst would be present, and the angelic messengers would come back and fourth into the service-proclaiming the new time to the whole community in which we live. And not our church, but the world would be set into confusion and disarray, because the word of God had taken hold of it, and made the first last and the last first, and turned it all upside-down. What a glorious vision of a church that by the engines of grace started a new day with a new people here among

us "repeopling" the face of the earth: right here by the boardwalk, by the subway-Ells, by Marlboro, Surfside, Neptune - Gravesend below the old Coney Island Creek - whose purified waters would change to clearest crystal.

Perhaps that's enough of the vision. We feebly struggle. Charles in thankfulness put flowers on the altar for his mother Sylvia. Hannah is playing some beautiful chords on the piano. Our attendance is low. Our doors are shabby. Some homeless spend cold nights in our beat-up busses beside the church. People have little time. People have even less thought and commitment for the things of the church and for the ways of God. The church is a place to donate your old and dirty clothes. The leaders make small steps, the children have high hopes, and we keep on in faith and hope.

One thing I noticed about the beatitudes - they seem to straddle a really rough condition, and the fulfillment and glory in what God has accomplished. The poor who rule nothing have the rule of heaven; those who mourn have comfort; those who are without means and resources inherit the earth; those who hunger and thirst - not for money and possessions, but for righteousness, are filled; the merciful also stand with one foot in mercy, the pure in heart also see God; the peace-makers are also children of God; and the persecuted stand with one foot in the dominion of heaven.

What does that mean? It means that the Glory Church is the lowly church, the church that mourns, the church of the poor, the hungry, persecuted.... With one foot in this church we straddle with the other in the communion of saints that already rejoices in a worship in heaven that no earthly church could equal. Otherwise why don't we all go to the well endowed and prominent Good Shepherd Lutheran Church on Fourth Avenue, as not a small group of us has done? Or to the Pentecostal Church there, to which our Spanish people in the dimness of their vision have gone?

Let me relate a vision to you that comes from Luther's explanation of the Magnificat (p. 310 to 311) A woman sits by the altar and sees three women seated before it, and a young man appears from the altar, and runs to the first. Luther calls them virgins. He lifts the veil of the first virgin and covers her with kisses, caressing her lovingly. Then he goes to the second, and kisses her too, but not so much, and does not give her as much attention. To the third he goes and treats her very unseemly. He strikes her in the face, pulls her hair and shows no affection, then goes back to the altar and disappears. And the significance lies in the fact that some Christians need to be given everything by God, and they only serve God because they want these benefits. The second kind of Christians still need benefits, but know that they need to love God for his naked goodness, and not just for the gifts. And the third virgin represents the most mature Christian who loves God for his naked goodness, and not for his benefits, and would continue to be faithful and to praise God, even if they were never to receive

one benefit, if that were possible, and even if they were to be condemned to hell, and experience nothing but persecution and hardship and suffering, even then they would continue to love God for God's self alone. Right now I tend to identify with the third virgin, because at times it seems God does not give us a friendly sign. We seem to get slapped in the face again and again. And God even pulls our hair! But can't you see through all that to the promises...to the blessedness....What kind of a relationship is possible if someone just wants selfish benefits out of it, and leaves when the partner is no longer able to give? What good are rice-Christians, ie. those who come not for their transformation and empowerment in the Gospel, but for the material gain?

In our congregation Christ has pronounced us blessed! In this particular one where the needs so far surpass what could fill them. Where cancer attacks our saints, and threatens to tear them out of the land of the living, where gruesome spirits come over our people and take away their sound mind, making us beg God for mercy, and deliver us out of this veil of tears into the arms of his comfort, where he dries every tear we cry. Precisely this fellowship is pronounced blessed by our Lord, because we get ripped off every-which way we turn around, so we don't dare leave any equipment in the church, and find we are crippled to work in it, because there is no security.

It is this congregation that our Lord declares to be blessed. It is this one that makes us have one foot in eternity, the better portion of our heart in the Kingdom of Heaven, where in the company of the saints, we hear the living voice of God speaking peace and comfort to us who are his people, the angelic choirs lifting up our souls to rejoice in God our savior, the strains of heavenly music that is the sharing of love, as the heavy loads are lifted from off our backs, one by one, and we enter into light and life eternal.

What can we say on the day of all the saints? My words are feeble. Our strength is like nothing. Our church is such a sorry excuse for what might really be by the grace of God.

But God in Christ pronounces us blessed. God in Christ proclaims us saints. God in Christ joins into communion with us in our sorry state, and with all the company of heaven lifts us already into the glorious victory procession of the triumphant church in heaven. And there we commune with those who are now at rest, because so great was their labor for us. Amen.