

Blessed Are the Saints

This morning's Gospel brings us Luke's version of the Beatitudes. Jesus offers his disciples four sets of blessings and warnings, then dispenses some of his most fundamental instructions. You may have noticed that Luke's text seems similar to the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. It is similar, but not identical. Luke's beatitudes are simpler than Matthew's, immediately balanced by "woes" as Matthew's are not, and spoken only to the disciples, though probably for the benefit of others listening in. The settings differ, too – Matthew puts Jesus atop a mountain, while Luke places him in "a level place" where his voice reaches out, not down. This geographic difference is reflected in the names we give to the two texts. Matthew's telling is called the Sermon on the Mount; Luke's is the Sermon on the Plain.

Bible scholars have debated for centuries whether Matthew and Luke are relaying the same sermon. The majority view is that the two Gospels describe a single sermon from a common source, a hypothetical text written by an anonymous author known as "Q." (Q is short for "Quelle," the German word for "source." It all gets a little circular.) Personally, I favor the minority view that Luke and Matthew recount two different, albeit similar, sermons. We know Jesus traveled from town to town, preaching wherever he went. I believe Jesus adjusted his sermons to his audience while remaining true to his main themes. Jerry Bowyer, a Christian financial advisor, agrees, suggesting that Jesus took account of the economic circumstances of his listeners when delivering his remarks. Bowyer thinks the Sermon on the Plain, with its emphasis on the spiritual risks of wealth and pride, targeted the well-to-do landowners and self-important Pharisees of Jerusalem. In Luke's sermon, Jesus, in a level place, is literally standing eye-to-eye with the rich and powerful as he urges them to take a more Godly path.

The Sermon on the Plain is especially suitable for 21st Century Episcopalians. Most of us live comfortably enough, and we live vastly better than even the wealthiest people did in Jesus's time. But that doesn't mean we should take only the "woes" to heart. Jesus's blessings and woes aren't opposites. They're to be read together and in conjunction with what follows. God blesses us when we are in need, but offers nothing more when we become self-satisfied. God promises justice and mercy to those who hunger for them, but doesn't like us to ignore the sufferings of the oppressed. God comforts us in sorrow, but doesn't much care for our thoughtless laughter when those around us are in pain. God blesses us when we, like the prophets, speak up for what's right no matter the cost, and shakes his head when we succumb to false flattery. Jesus is clear: we are to be humble, answer violence and hatred with forgiveness and prayer, share what we have, treat others as mercifully as we wish they would treat us and, above all else, never forget that everything good in our lives comes by God's grace and not through our own efforts.

The Sermon on the Plain summarizes just about everything we need to know to lead a life that's pleasing to God. Throw in Jesus's instructions on how to pray the Our Father and the Gospels' assurance that we're saved because our LORD redeemed us, and everything else is gravy. Christianity is surprisingly simple. In theory, you could read it all in one sitting and, if you lived according to those few Scriptures, you'd never have to look at it again.

In practice, though, that's not how it works. For two thousand years, Christians around the world have gathered on a regular basis to pray, study Scripture, and share in Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. There have been an almost infinite variety of historical and cultural variations in our worship, and God knows we haven't always gotten it right. But Christianity, with its message of faith, hope and the loving reconciliation of humanity to God through the sacrifice of Jesus the Christ, has endured for twenty centuries. And, despite what the critics and

doomsayers contend, Christianity is still very much alive and thriving. The Episcopal Church claims over 1.5 million members in the United States alone. The Anglican Communion comprises more than 80 million members in 44 regional and national member churches in more than 160 countries. And, according to Worlddata.info, Christianity is the largest of the Abrahamic traditions, with more than 2.2 billion believers worldwide.

Christianity's resilience and growth over the centuries is undoubtedly due to the grace of our Father, the love of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. But it's also attributable, at least in part, to the countless saints and martyrs who dedicated their lives and often suffered agonizing torments to keep our faith alive. The Episcopal Church venerates over 325 saints, ancient and modern, assigning feast days in their honor. We also revere another two dozen or so saintly souls who haven't been around long enough to make the calendar. But even that list is misleading, because many of our feast days honor not just individual saints but their companions, as well as anonymous saints and martyrs whose faith inspires even though their names are lost to us.

We commemorate those extraordinary people on All Saints Day. Recognizing that countless other faithful souls who have passed into memory also shaped and strengthened our Christian faith, we celebrate All Souls Day, too. You may well have your favorite saints – I certainly have my own. But it's important to remember that the good folk whom we venerate weren't necessarily "saintly" in the popular sense. They were human, just like us, and they had their flaws. Some were bad-tempered, argumentative or impatient. A lot of them were reckless. Some courted martyrdom without considering the needs of their loved ones. Our saints were impetuous, outspoken, uncompromising, stubborn as all get out ... and thank God they were. They gave us Christianity as we know it, the Episcopal Church as we live it, and the opportunity to accept Christ's invitation to become saints ourselves as we share in his life and teachings.

Without the saints and faithful souls who've gone before us, the world might never have known what Jesus accomplished at Golgotha. We wouldn't have the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church or, in particular, St. Luke's. We might have to join the 30% of Americans who, according to the Pew Research Center, identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular." We might get more sleep on Sunday mornings, but we wouldn't have the chance to pray, study and share in communion with one another. We might encounter one another as neighbors or even become friends, but we wouldn't know each other as brothers and sisters in the beloved family of Christ. And that would be a sin.

The saints and faithful souls whom we honor today shared their God-given talents, whatever monetary wealth they had and, in particular, their powerful devotion to God during their lifetimes. Their gifts were handed down through the centuries to enrich our lives today. That's what stewardship is really all about – caring for our faith and our church not only for our own benefit, but for generations to come. Christianity will probably look different in the future and, as St. Paul observed, we see through a glass darkly now, and we cannot imagine what the future will hold. But I'd wager anything you like that the people who live in that future will need Jesus and the church because people always have, and they always will.

Just as we venerate the saints and faithful souls who went before us for their good stewardship of our church, our good stewardship can inspire future generations to venerate us, the saints and faithful souls of our time. As we make our pledges to St. Luke's today, it's not just about keeping the doors open and the lights on for another year. It's also about making sure that this church lives on, so that people we may not have met and may never know will benefit some day from what we give today. Blessed are the saints, then and now, for they will serve and see God. *Amen.*