

A sermon preached by Father Dwight D. Duncan, ssc - Rector, St Matthias, Dallas, Texas

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THE SOLEMNITY OF ALL SAINTS

The saints for whom we give thanks today are *not* those we can name, saints like Peter, Teresa, Athanasius, Clare. The Church has designated an annual day of thanksgiving for each of these. This day does not belong to them.

No, this day belongs to those legions of holy folk who, like most of us, were **ordinary**. Our First Reading describes them as those who have no memorial, who have perished as if they had not lived. Their sanctity did not blaze before the eyes of their contemporaries, nor fix them in our corporate memory.

And yet, by these ordinary saints, the darkness of our fallen world in their generations was beaten back, the people whose lives they touched were the better for it, and the Church, God's ark of salvation, sailed into our generation, to take us on board. Because of this, they eventually will be where the greatest of saints, the Mother of Our Lord, now is, and they will enjoy the very same thing she now enjoys: heaven. This is why this day is the feast of hope for you and me: if this could happen with and for them, it can happen with and for us.

That hope will be made a real possibility in just a few moments for two wee men, Emerson James Smith and Joshua Matthias Wieber, as they receive the baptismal washing by water and the Holy Spirit which will unite them to Jesus in the fellowship of his Church. What I want to play out before you now is why this washing is so important for the salvation of souls. Here we go!

The eminent English writer, critic and social commentator, Malcolm Muggeridge, was for years a rabid atheist until life finally did a sufficient enough trip on him to "wake him up, so he could smell the coffee." One of the things which woke him up was his recognition that the Church's doctrine of Sin was the one doctrine which really needed no explanation. As he wrote, all people have to do is read their newspapers, watch the news on T.V. **and** look at their own lives and relationships.

If you do that with a clear eye, you can't avoid seeing that there is something like a "massive disorder in existence, a pathology that seems to extend all through existence, whether we consider the community or the individual." (Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*) The Jewish-Christian explanation for this deathly disorder is expressed in a three-letter word: SIN ... "separation." Separation from whom? From God and ourselves. At some moment, humanity insanely chose against who we are: though a creature designed to be *under* the loving authority of God, we reached to be equal to, if not above him, in authority of our own lives and that of the world.

The consequence? We sundered our relationship with God and became not *more* than ourselves but *less* than ourselves. And things are screwed up, in us, with us, between us. It's our fault and left to ourselves we would end up in hell.

This sad soul-condition is as true for Emerson James and Joshua Matthias at their young ages as it is for me at my 61 years. The great theologian, Augustine, in the 5th century, put it this way: “Infants aren’t innocent, they’re ignorant.” Nothing can arise within us that is not present from our beginning. The fact that you and I do commit *sins*, and that Emerson and Joshua eventually will, is witness to the fact that we are all in a state of *SIN* (disorder, rebellion, and estrangement from God and others).

This situation with our souls is not what God intended in his creation of us. What he intended was perfect communion and enjoyment of him and one another forever. This situation is, however, what God risked: God wants lovers, so he had to give us the same power he has, the power of choice. He gifted us with free will, the capacity to choose to do and to act in accordance with his will or not. And this freedom means, of course, that we have the power to choose our future: one with God, or one without him.

Now, in response to our mucking things up, God had at least two choices: annihilate creation and start all over. *OR* Work it out with us and within us. How? By himself entering into the situation to get us out. Here’s an image of our situation for you: *quicksand*. We’re in quicksand, which will suck you down into itself and suffocate you. When you’re in quicksand, you need someone outside your predicament to get close enough to you in it, while retaining secure footing on firm ground, so you can be pulled out. That’s God.

And that’s what God chose to do, and he did it in Jesus. Notice the name: *Yeshua, Jesus, Joshua ...* God is Savior, God saves. SAVES: Precisely. That’s what we need. To be saved from ourselves and from everything within our environment which can ultimately keep us from being restored to what God created us to be, so that we can end up with God instead of ending up in hell.

Now, when God-in-Jesus completed the work he needed to do to save us, since creation would continue, he had to establish a means by which a saving relationship with him would be available to every generation. And the means he constructed is the Church, the community in which Christ Jesus dwells spiritually, as he promised: “Where two or three (*the community*) are agreed together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them.” And because Christ Jesus resides in this holy community, his Truth and Grace are in it for us.

You see, to be saved, we need the TRUTH: we need knowledge of who God is, who we are, what has happened between God and us, what can be done about this, and how to go about it. But we need more than Truth. It’s one thing to know what you need to do. It’s a whole other thing to be able to do it. And the effect of sin on our powers is such that we don’t have the ability on our own to do what we must do to become whole.

So we need God himself to help us. The word we use for God’s gift of his own energy and power to us is *grace*, which means “gift,” because it is a gift wholly unmerited by us.

SO, God saves us by incorporating us into the community called *Church*, the community in which his Truth and his Grace reside. As we are drawn into the Church, and truly and fully live our life in her, our center of authority is changed from ourselves to God. His Truth begins healing us from our distorted, damaged perceptions of reality. And his Grace enables us to submit to his leadership and conform our lives to his will. We begin to become whole, integrated, that is, *holy* ... even as God is whole, integrated, holy. And the disorder of the world is beaten back by our presence within it. It becomes at least a bit more “on earth as it is in heaven” because of our presence within it.

Thus, we can understand why the early Christians made these claims: “*There is no salvation apart from the Church*” ... “*He who does not have the Church as his Mother, cannot have God as his Father.*”

But how does one get into this community? How can one be assured of God’s claiming us from out of the fallen world and giving us citizenship in the new world of the Church? The way in which we are born into this saving community, the way in which we are assured of having been claimed by God and planted in the new world of his Church is BAPTISM: the washing by water and the Spirit. This is the way which Jesus established before his death and resurrection.

And if we will live our lives faithfully within the Church, growing ever more in the knowledge of God’s Truth which she has to convey to us and collaborating with the Grace God gives us through her, then, whether in this life or beyond it in the next, we shall become saints: integrated, wholesome creatures, no darkness or disorder in us, but full of life and light, the life and the light of God.

But there is a catch; there always is! We must *intend* this. We must want it and collaborate with God’s grace in achieving it. In other words, while you can’t become a saint without God, God’s not going to do it for you. You’re going to have to put yourself out. No going to sleep on God’s operating table and waking up changed into Hugh Jackman or Nicole Kidman. It’s more like 24 Hour Fitness, with a personal trainer: God.

This is what the saints for whom we give thanks today did. They were no spiritual aristocracy, but simply ordinary folk like you and me. They were normal men and women with the same passions, the same difficulties, the same obstacles as you and I ... and also with the same divine help available to them which we have available to us. God accepted their intention to belong to him and their willingness to expend themselves to live for him. And when God’s grace meets that intention and willingness in us, holiness is the result.

I pray that each of us, the already-baptized, will renew this day our intention and willingness to be reconstructed into saints. And I pray that with our help and by our example, Emerson James and Joshua Matthias, will come to desire this for themselves. The Lord is indeed glorious in his saints.