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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.37 No.51

The Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity

11/12/06

ALL SAINTS

A sermon by Father Robert Crouse, whom many of you will know as a friend of this parish and its clergy, and a frequent instructor of our Elliott House annual clergy seminar. This sermon, from 1986, sets forth a challenging account of the Christian vocation to holiness.

"But they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one...and God has prepared for them a city."

-Hebrews XI, 16

We keep today a festival in honour of all the saints, in honour of that great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations and kindreds and peoples and tongues, who stand before God's throne, and serve him day and night in his temple. We rejoice today in the triumphs of God's grace in all his saints; all those who have shone with the light of God's glory amidst the darkness of this world. We rejoice in the saints, who have passed through tribulation and have their reward in the vision of God. We rejoice in their mighty intercession, in which all of us must surely have a place: for we are, in Christ, one body, knit together in one communion and fellowship.

The saints are the heroes of Christian life; and if we celebrate them on this Festival of All Saints, if we venerate them, if we regard them as blessed above other men and women, I suppose that means that we see in them some great virtue, some surpassing beauty of character, some greatness of soul, to which we ourselves aspire—some great heroic quality which we seek to emulate. We pray that we may follow them in all virtuous and godly living.

But just what is their virtue? Just what is the heroic character of those saints we seek to imitate? To find an answer to that question, I suppose we might begin by glancing through the church's calendar of saints. But what we find there is really a bewildering array of very diverse characters—men and women and children, of all sorts and conditions: Apostles and martyrs, kings and queens and peasants, warriors and poets, and statesmen, and scholars, teachers, and preachers, and missionaries, and so on. It's really a bewildering diversity of characters, and it's not immediately obvious what all of them have in common. And surely some of them were not very attractive characters: uncom-promising, uncomfortable people, whom

the world had in derision and accounted mad, because they were out of tune with the standards and conventions of the world around them. Often, surely, they were misfits, and not much admired by their contemporaries.

There are, after all, many different kinds of heroes: Mostly, I suppose, we find ourselves inclined to admire those who seem most successful in this world's terms: the clever, the efficient, the entertaining, the beautiful, those who achieve spectacular success in one field or another, those who "get ahead". But the saints are not like that. Christian heroism seems to be of a different sort than that. No Christian saint is celebrated because of his success in such terms as those. In fact, in such terms, I suppose most Christian saints were appalling failures. Their heroism was something very different—something far more inward. Theirs was a heroism of faith, and hope, and love—a heroism more perhaps of desire than of achievement. Their heroism consisted in a certain inner struggle—the struggle to perfect the will—the struggle for a perfecting of love—a love which counts the world well lost of God's sake. The saints are those made perfect in the love of God. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, "they embraced the promises of God, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on this earth. They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one."

"Strangers and pilgrims"—These saints, these aliens, surely present us with a challenge. Their heroism is a problem, perhaps even an embarrassment to our Christianity. Most of us, surely, find ourselves very much at home in this world, and seek to work out our salvation very much in this world's terms. Our Christianity tends to be of a worldly sort, measured in terms of efficiency and productivity, and success in making this world more comfortable, as though this world were the end of all our striving. The great temptation of the contemporary Church—our great temptation as contemporary Christians—is to try to use the Gospel for essentially worldly ends.

The witness of the saints is rather that this world is not, and can never be, enough for human spirit: that the only adequate focus of human aspiration is God himself—that any lesser end is a distortion of love, and ultimately destructive. The world is to be loved, and we are commanded to love and serve our neighbour. But it matters profoundly how they are loved. They must be loved for God's sake, and for God's glory. That is the heart of sanctity; that perfectness of love is the heroism of the saints.

As we celebrate this festival, we recall our own vocation to be saints—to follow them in virtuous and godly living. We celebrate the triumphs of God's grace in them, and seek to share their holy fellowship. In this sacrament we celebrate, the veil is parted which divides their life from ours, and our worship and intercession become one with theirs. We are one Church, they in heaven and we on earth; one in our common life in Christ. Our imperfect prayers are aided by the more perfect intercessions of those spirits, pure in heart, who stand before the throne of God and serve him day and night.

Let us rejoice in this festival of the saints. Let us rejoice in their example, their fellowship, and their prayers. And as we approach the Sacrament today, let us especially remember our own calling to be saints—strangers and pilgrims here on earth, seeking a better country.

Let us pray that as the saints were nourished by the bread of life, so may we be nourished, and finally take our place, however humble, in their company.

“Thou who all things canst and knowest,
Who on earth such food bestowest,
Grant us with thy saints, though lowest,
Where the heavenly feast thou showest,
Fellow heirs and guests to be.”

The Rev. R. D. Crouse

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