

All Saints

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Are you called to be a saint? Are you called by God into a life which is oriented towards God and towards the building up of God's kingdom in this world? If so, you are in the right place. But first, let's clear up a common misunderstanding. Whenever we begin to talk about saints, we must first dispense with the notion that saints are those "other" people - you know, the ones with haloes above their heads whom we see in stained glass windows.

Every saint was once flesh and blood like you and me. And every saint had to work out, with God's help, just what it was that God was calling them to be, and to do. To assist us in identifying what sainthood consists of, Jesus provides some teaching in today's gospel. This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus links the lives of the people on earth to the life in heaven. He does this by using the term "blessed" - to "bless" is a divine action, often using an intermediary, like a priest, or a king, or a parent. These descriptions of the blessed are known as the "Beatitudes."

Before we look at three of these beatitudes, I want you to consider the notion that heaven and earth are places which overlap and mingle with each other, rather than being separate places. We don't hang around on earth waiting to die, and then go to heaven. If heaven came to earth in Jesus Christ, and he is present with us still, then heaven is part of our daily reality. "On earth, as in heaven," is our reminder to take an active part in the life of both.

So, how do we become this community of faith who inhabit both earth and heaven at the same time? Jesus provides us with examples from the Sermon on the Mount. Let's consider three of them now.

The first beatitude is "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The word "poor" in the original Greek describes not simply someone with few possessions, but a beggar. Whilst it is possible to be poor and not trouble anyone else, a beggar is someone who actively asks to be fed, to be clothed, and to have their basic needs provided for. This beatitude actually works on two levels: first, there is the idea that being in a state of wretched poverty is no barrier to receiving the blessings of God. Second, it is the "poor in spirit" who are blessed. If your spiritual life is next to nothing, God will still bless you. But keep in mind the original sense of being a beggar, rather than just being poor. In our poverty of spirit we are forced to beg God who out of his riches will supply our spiritual needs. If you have a problem with the idea of begging, then simply say, "pray" instead of "beg." Having said that, a refusal to beg is often a symptom of pride, which I think is what Jesus is getting at. This lies at the heart of what it means to be a saint. You are not to be a saint on your own terms, but by relying on the grace and mercy of God.

The beatitudes are a series of promises made by God to those who are called to be saints. Let's listen to another one: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Again, Jesus is mingling earth and heaven. His listeners will have remembered how God fed their ancestors with manna in the wilderness. Now God feeds them

with the words of heaven. In Psalm 107, from which this saying is taken, it is the Lord's steadfast love which saves the people from death. God can turn things around, even when the world is plunged into darkness and gloom. God has the power to transform suffering into joy and evil into righteousness. That hunger for righteousness is an essential part of our humanity. It's what makes us yearn for the truth and reject the lie, the obfuscation, the falsehood. The hunger for righteousness is the healthy ache which prevents our soul from accepting the way of the cynic, the way of untruth, and ultimately, the way of death. God promises to fill that hunger with truth and by coming closer to us - righteousness includes sharing God's own being. His light burns brightly in the hearts of the righteous.

The last beatitude is perhaps the hardest: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." God's world contains both good and evil. Stand up for God and you may find yourself in conflict with another kind of god, such as the Emperor. Stand up against evil and you will be slandered and called all sorts of names and threatened. Throughout history, there has been an urge among some people to silence the voices of others. The early Christian martyrs died for their faith. They were saints because they went to their death willingly and trusted in the promises of God. Today, in a society where there is a growing secularism, believers are often ridiculed online in social media posts. What could be worse than the baying voices of Twitter set loose on someone who doesn't toe the line? Christians are called to speak the truth and stand by their convictions, not cave in to the Twitter mob. To be a saint takes courage.

Now you must decide if you want to become a saint yourself. To be a saint you need both faith and courage. Fortunately, history provides us with example of saints who inspire us to keep going when things get tough. Most of us are unlikely to suffer the fate of the early saints, like Stephen, or Polycarp, who suffered terrible deaths at the hands of their persecutors. Stephen was stoned to death; Polycarp was burned at the stake and pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor.

In case this is putting you off becoming a saint, let me reassure you by saying that most saints ended their lives peacefully, their lives having been characterized by a trust in God and a desire to offer themselves to God as a slave or servant. One of the earliest saints was Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose words to the archangel Gabriel, "Let it be with me according to your will," stand as the opening creed of sainthood.

I have my own favorite saints, who have inspired me and whose example I don't think I will ever match; but then I was never meant to. When it comes to being a saint, I think of the saying, "Bloom where you are planted." God calls saints in all walks of life, in all shapes and sizes, at any time. If he has called you to be a saint, I hope you have started already in sainthood. If you are not sure where to begin, remember the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" is the first one - that's where you start. Don't be too proud to beg. You are not greater than, or equal to God. Fortunately, God listens to the poor beggars we are and helps us to find food for our souls.

So, be inspired and become a saint! God is recruiting right now. He needs saints because there are a lot of the other kind in the world. Are you ready? No? Good, then you can begin! We couldn't be saints if we felt we could do it all on our own. God is calling you to be one of

his own, a citizen of both earth and heaven, who knows their need as one who is poor in spirit, and who is willing to grow in the character and courage of the righteous.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford