

SPG#144, All Saints C

November 4, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Daniel 7:1-3,15-18

Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

In the course of the church year we encounter the words of many in scripture and many in the history of the church. In the Episcopal Church itself we occasionally hear the name of Samuel Seabury, the first Bishop in the United States. The feast day for Bishop Seabury is coming up on November 14. We, perhaps less often, hear the name of Jackson Kemper. Bishop Kemper, from Pleasant Valley, New York, was the first of the “Missionary Bishops,” whose job it was to lay foundations for evangelizing the new frontier in the U.S. in the early 1800’s. He laid the foundations for dioceses and churches in Iowa, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Kansas, and Minnesota. His feast day is on May 24. Thomas Cranmer, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, whose day, along with Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, is on October 16.

Perhaps some of you have seen the recent movie, “Elizabeth the Golden Years” starring Cate Blanchett. There is no feast day for Elizabeth I. But after Thomas Cranmer wrote the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549, it was through a process called The Elizabethan Settlement, involving church leaders, the Queen, and the Parliament that the real basis for the Prayer Book was established.

Perhaps some of you noticed that Mother Teresa, in her memoirs, admitted to having many doubts about her faith.

In the scripture we hear of King David, how as a shepherd boy he killed the giant Philistine, Goliath, with a stone from a sling. We hear of his great deeds as king of Israel. We see him succumb to temptation with Bathsheba, and admit his fault when confronted by the prophet, Nathan. We hear of

Moses and the Exodus. We hear of the great prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, and Ezekiel.

In the New Testament we follow the exploits of John the Baptizer, the forerunner, the one who announced the coming of Jesus Christ. We hear of Mary and Joseph, of all the disciples, men and women who were followers of Jesus. We hear of Stephen, the first known Deacon, who because of his unashamed confession of faith in Jesus Christ, was stoned until he was dead. He stood at the head of the line of a long list of Christians who were persecuted, tortured, imprisoned, and killed because of their professing a faith.

And so it is our custom to refer to these people within a memory of the church year, or within a lectionary reading, or within a story. And we look for a link between their lives and ours.

But today is different. Today we celebrate that all of them are our sisters and brothers in Christ. All Saints Day is a glimpse at the wider, deeper reality of the Communion of Saints.

That simply means that in Christ the barriers of time and space fall away leaving a family in all times and in all places who confess their faith for God in Jesus Christ. It is the wider Body of Christ.

It is the Church Universal. Local congregations remember and sometimes say the names of people in the parish who have passed away. Most recently we are remembering Bill McKibben.

In a wider sense, All Saints is a way of remembering that ministry is built on ministry.

The efforts we make in this parish are built on the efforts of other Christians who were called to ministry in other ways and in other times. It is a way of remembering that those who have passed on still encourage us in our own ministries. And somehow in the Body of Christ, we are mysteriously connected to those who are yet to come. We ourselves are the building blocks upon which their

ministries will be built.

And so, in faith we reach for them who lived and worked and served, and rejoiced, and cried, who feared, who were brave, who were confused and clear headed, who were strong and weak, who sometimes loved, and sometimes did not care, just like us. And they reach for us. And we, who in all times and places serve a risen Lord, huddle together as the Body of Christ.

A favorite of mine is the patriarchal figure of Jacob, who wrestled with God on a mountain. As the sun is coming up God says “Let me go.” Jacob says “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” Then God blesses him. There are times in life when our ability to see truth as revealed is linked to our willingness to grapple and wrestle with challenges and difficulties.

For many of us the Communion of Saints is a difficult thing to grasp. Our culture is more accustomed to delineating spaces and differences between people as opposed to togetherness, or as opposed to communion. And many of us suffer from a sense of isolation and aloneness.

But behind our false divisions of age and sex and class and race is the deep current of togetherness and communion that God intends for us. In that togetherness, in that community, there is a place for each of us and all of us, past, present, and future.

Then perhaps we could realize that we are not just surrounded by walls and ceiling here. We are surrounded by a countless throng of the faithful, or as the writer of Hebrews calls it, a great cloud of witnesses. We ourselves in our lives in the 21st century are connected to and caught up in this cloud of witnesses.

For this larger Body of Christ the topics of the day are love and service, commitment and ministry, peace and justice. With an appreciation for the larger body one can see how a decision made by one of the saints became a building block for someone else who built on that decision.

So, yes, the decisions that we make here about commitment and service, about stewardship, will have ramifications in our own common life but in the larger common life of all the saints.

For those of you who are present here, who love and work in this place, in this community, I think of you as saints. And please let us celebrate what we do in this church in these days. With so many saints past, present, and future, it would be easy to think of ourselves as insignificant in comparison. And yet one of the rock solid truths of All Saints is that everyone has a place. Everyone has an importance. Everyone has a uniqueness. Everyone.

In today's reading from Ephesians we find these words of Paul addressed to the church at Ephesus, but also to us, **I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.**

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

The reading is remarkable. But it is also typical for Paul. For he speaks of his readers and of all the saints in one breath. So, let us without reservation step into the world of all saints where we know

that our work is built on the labor of those who have passed, where we know that others will build on what we do.

Let us celebrate the truth and the glory of the cloud of witnesses. Let us celebrate the truth that each one of us has a place. It was true for Elizabeth I. It was true for Mother Teresa. It was true for Jacob. It is true for you and me. It is true for all the saints. Amen.