

On Tuesday night, at the Vigil for All Saints Day, I reminded the congregation of what it says in the Apocryphal Book *The Wisdom of Solomon*; namely that "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. *Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect.*" (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1,9, NRSV)

Isn't it interesting when God asks you a question? As if he didn't know the answer to everything! Jesus famously asks Peter, "*But who do **you** say that I am?*" (Mt.16:15) And it's not like Christ needs any reminding, by the way. It's important to take notice when God asks a question. I believe the first question God asks in the Bible is "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9) "Where are you, Adam? Why would you feel the need to hide from me, Eve?" He frequently asks me the same question, but it's not about my physical location. It's more along the lines of, "James, where are you in your journey? Which direction are you going? Are you aiming for the right destination? Are you still sailing toward a harbor I've picked out for you? James, where are you?" And once again, it's not like he doesn't know. I mean, he knows everything. So, when God through the elder of heaven asks John of Patmos "Who are these robed in white?" it's not as though he doesn't know. The only conclusion I can come to here is that when God asks you a question, it's because he wants you to think about something.

Now John wisely says to God through his messenger. "Sir, you know!" (See Rev.7:14) I like the NRSV Translation here, which is "Sir, you are the one who knows." Because he's really got all the answers has God, and John knows this. It's kind of like when Jesus asks his closest friends after so many have been turned off by the harder demands of his teaching. And after so many of these fair-weather disciples turn away from Jesus, he asks The Twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter in one of his rarer moments of insight says, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (Jn.6:68) "Jesus, where else are we going to go? I mean, you have all the answers, even the question of death itself."

No, when God asks a question, it's not like he's looking to us for wisdom or advice. Rather, there's something he wants us to think about. And this year in preparation for All Saints Sunday I've been thinking about this interchange between God and the Apostle John, and I've been focusing on who these people robed in white are. God, through the Elder of Heaven says that "These are they who have come through the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb."

Now some have thought that this group of Saints is specifically those who come through the Great Tribulation of the End Times, described in places like Daniel 9 and 12, and Matthew 24. Hmm...I'm not so sure. I think for various reasons that what John saw here is a much larger population of the redeemed, a number that truly no one could ever count. And not just those people who are going to suffer horrific torture and awful persecution under the Antichrist. No, I think these are actually souls from a much larger gene pool. People who have gone through the crucible of life on the planet, and faced all the outrageous swings and roundabouts that flesh is heir to, and have none-the-less still been washed clean by the blood of the lamb. In short, dear ones, it seems to me that this myriad of saints far too numerous for anyone to count may indeed be folks you can meet just like the old song says, in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or on trains or in shops or at tea. Because it's true the saints of God are just folks like you and like me. People who have faced down the deceptions and delusions of this world with the joyous faith in Jesus our Lord, and so yes, have indeed made their spiritual robes gleaming white by the precious blood of the sacrifice.

I know I'm a citizen of heaven; that much is clear. I know Jesus is my Lord, and he has secured my freedom from death through his own glorious death and resurrection. I do confess Him just about every chance I get. But I'm not really crazy about being a Martyr. We're going to hear a little later on this morning about incredible people who are living on the front lines of Christian Evangelism.

And surely they deserve our support, both in treasure and in prayer. But as for me, I quell at the thought of actually going to Africa, or Asia, or just about anywhere to put my life at risk to help people who are struggling. To help those who are struggling against hunger, and poverty, and Aids, and Ebola, and Isis, the Zeta Cartel, the Fark Revolutionaries, and so on?

No, I can't take a year off and go be a Missionary. Do I really have to go to **that** length of risk and deprivation to be considered a faithful Saint of God? Is there any hope for somebody like me that God will actually want me close to Him in glory forever?

Jesus says, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" (Mt.5:3) But aren't we all spiritually impoverished? And if we're all malnourished from a purely spiritual point of view, being the flesh-and blood creatures that we are, then what makes one spiritually famished human being blessed and another not? Could it be that the one who is blessed is only different because he has accepted the rich gift of grace, regardless of the state in which he is found? Is the state of sainthood reached because in her state of grace, the Child of God has learned the intense joy there is in simply being where God has placed her, in want or in plenty.

It's been a tough few weeks. Next Tuesday, our Church family will hold our 5<sup>th</sup> funeral since mid-September. Jesus says, "*Blessed are those who mourn.*" (Mt.5:5) But don't we all mourn – those of us who are brave enough to love? So, if one is blessed through mourning and another descends instead into irreconcilable grief, isn't the difference based on **what** we mourn? Because those who mourn things, or ambition, or a perceived lack of opportunity – those people are destined to bitterness. But those who mourn the beloved eventually dwell in the sweetness of those memories of companionship and mutual adoration. And some of that sweetness comes in this life, but oh how much more sweet love awaits us in the life which is to come.

And going on in the Beatitudes, Jesus says that those who are meek are blessed in this life. (Mt.5:5) But surely, we are all called to submit to one another, in the bonds of marriage if in nothing else. (See Eph.5:21) But perhaps true meekness finds its real blessing in its essential identity of, without fear, understanding and welcoming the patient forbearance of trial and challenge as neither the surrender of our rights, nor cowardice. But rather, this patience and perseverance born in humility is the opposite of anger, and arrogance, and envy. (Albert Barnes *Notes on the New Testament*, 20.5) And so yes, those who come to understand meekness as the loving strength that it truly is are indeed blessed. Thus the list of Beatitudes continues, where a thirst for righteousness is the confirmation of loving purpose.

The quest for a pure heart does indeed yield a kind of vision, whereby we see Jesus clearly in all his loving glory. The peacemakers do indeed acquire the paternity of the heavenly father by becoming the true children of the living God, not only in name but in fact and character. And the practice of boundless mercy as identified by Christ is the greatest of Christ's traditions – it actually marks and stamps us as his very own.

I love what Bishop Greg Rickel, Bishop of the Diocese of Olympia has to say about the Beatitudes. In his All Saints Day sermon a few years back, Bishop Rickel wrote, "The foundation of our theology and therefore how we see God is either based in love or fear. Fear makes us have a scarcity mentality, that says there is never enough to go around and thus, the [lamp] oil will run out [before the bride groom arrives (See Mt. 25:1-13), fear tells us that it will. But love, on the other hand, tells us otherwise, that there is always enough. Love tells us that Christ is coming **all** the time, in all the faces we meet and not just the good ones. Love makes us be ready for the coming of the Christ, to live always in the hope of opportunities to give [back with abandon to those around us] all that love which has been given so freely to us."

So, it's really up to you... The choice is yours to make. God is the perfect gentleman, after all. You have the freedom of attitude to decide what kind of life you are going to lead. You can live in fear, constant fear of being unrewarded, or unappreciated, or insecure and under threat. Or, you can truly taste and see that the Lord is good. (Ps.38:3) You can recognize the fact that God has chosen you to live into the life of his Saint. And you can make the joyous realization that, in the end, the Saints of God lack for absolutely nothing. It's true: "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect." In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Blessed all Saints day! James Barnhill, 11-01-2017