

All Saints Day or Sunday

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Luke 6:20-31; Ephesians 1:11-23

All Saints Day is a feast day of great antiquity. References to such a feast are noted by St. Ephrem Syrus (who died in AD 373) in his papers and by the great preacher, Chrysostom (who died in 407). It received pontifical authorization by Pope Boniface IV on May 13, 609, and has been celebrated by all the church ever since. In the Western churches, it is celebrated on November 1 of each year, while in the Eastern churches, it is celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost. In churches that do not celebrate the daily hours, All Saints Day is observed on the first Sunday of November (thus, our designation above).

The purpose of All Saints Day is to honor all the Christian saints, known and unknown, who have been part of God's work through Christ upon the earth. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it, it is a day for celebrating all "the Saints, Martyrs and Doctors of the Church". It is followed by All Souls Day (November 2), in which the church commemorates all the souls of the faithful departed. Thus, with the observance of both these days, we remember all those in Christ who have gone before us, back to the Apostles themselves.

Of course, All Saints Day occurs on the next day after Halloween. So what does Halloween have to do with all this? It is All Saints Day that gave rise to the celebration of Halloween, or "All Hallows Eve" (All Saints Day was also called "All Hallows Day" or "All Hallowed Day"). In the medieval church, All Hallows Eve emerged from the mythology and story telling of the people as the night that the ghosts of the dead prowled the earth, waiting to be honored on the next two days. This was never official teaching of the church (in fact, the church greatly discouraged it), but it rapidly caught on in popular culture. People envisioned that the dead walked about the earth as skeletons, ghosts or in their ancient clothes, knocking on people's doors and demanding treats or face the consequences. Most people huddled in fear in their homes, townspeople would set giant bonfires to both illuminate the town and drive away the evil spirits, and young pranksters would dress up in costumes both to scare people and to gather booty. Halloween was greatly feared by most medieval and Renaissance people, and they were relieved when the light of November 1 dawned and the feast day began!

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18 forms a transition in the book of Daniel from stories about Daniel (chs. 1-6) to visions and apocalyptic writings attributed to Daniel (chs. 7-12). According to the book that bears his name, Daniel was both a key political leader in Babylon and a Jewish confidant of King Nebuchadnezzar. The transitional prophecy is that of the Vision of the Four Beasts, a prophecy that would shape the remaining collection of apocalyptic literature, both in Daniel and in other books of the Bible (e.g., Revelation).

The prophet writes, "I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another" (7:2-3). He then goes on to describe these beasts (vss. 4-8) and then their judgment before the "Ancient One", who is clearly Yahweh (vss. 9-14). The prophet reports, "(One of) the beasts was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts,

their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time” (vss. 11-12).

The vision which the prophet saw then reached its denouement. “I saw one like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed” (vss. 13-14).

With the conclusion of this vision, the prophet reflects on what he has seen, for “my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me” (vs. 15). Therefore, one of the angels in attendance upon the prophet told him the meaning of the dream. “As for these four great beasts,” he said, “four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever” (vss. 17-18).

What does this strange vision mean? Who are the four beasts? Who is “the Son of Man”? And what does this have to do with All Saints Sunday and the celebration of all who have lived faithful to God and God’s intentions for all humanity?

Who were the four beasts? The prophet tells us that they were “four kings (who) arise out of the earth”. They are clearly the representatives of four empires that have ruled the earth. Each of these empires is represented by a ferocious beast – the first being a lion, the second a bear, the third a leopard and the fourth a dragon, the latter of whom has ten successors (ten little horns). What these empires are is speculative, based upon alternate readings of the book of Daniel. Some biblical scholars see them as Babylon (the lion), Media (the bear), Persia (the leopard) and Greece (a dragon), with the ten horns being the ten successors to Alexander the Great. Other scholars see them as Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and Rome (with the ten horns being ten Roman emperors).

Whoever the four beasts represent, the point of the narrative is that they are held up to judgment by the “Ancient of Days”, their authority and power is taken away from them, and they are either destroyed or subsumed under the rule of the “Son of Man” who’s “dominion shall not pass away”.

To best understand this prophecy and what it has to do with All Saints Sunday, one must examine the pivotal word in this prophecy. It is the word “dominion”, which is used four times, and in strategic places. Dominion is taken away from the four beasts (vs. 12), and is transferred to the Son of Man who is “given dominion and glory and kingship (over) all peoples, nations and languages” (vs. 14a). “His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away” (vs. 14b), the author concludes.

“Dominion”, in the Hebrew Bible, was used in two primary ways. It either referred to God’s sovereign power, or it was used to represent the “domination system” – the political, economic and religious “powers” of society that controlled humanity and made them bend to the system’s will. In many passages, that “domination system” was demonically or Satanically empowered, in that it had an evil spirituality that permeated and corrupted all that it touched. In the Old

Testament Lesson for All Saints Sunday, it is clear that the author is working with both Hebrew understandings of dominion. The world, he proclaims, is ruled by domination systems – whether it is Babylon, Media, Persia, Greece or Rome – one defeating and following upon the other. Each “Power” is more powerful than the “Power” it has conquered for it has absorbed the spiritual evil, political and economic exploitation and military might of the defeated empire into its empire, adding to its own strength. Each is evil, existing only to place its will down upon all who come under its authority.

But this lesson proclaims that such corporate evil doesn’t end with the mightiest dominating empire of the world. It ends with God, and with God’s sovereignty exercised to bring low these powers and to free humanity from the tyranny of oppression, greed, exploitation and control. And they are set free through the intervention of a strange figure, the “Son of Man”, who is given authority over the world’s systems, and brings liberation, salvation and transformation to all those embracing his reign.

This is the message of Daniel 7:1-18. It ends with the triumph and praise of the Son of Man and, consequently, of God. But it doesn’t quite end there. The final statement of the passage is not what one would anticipate it to be. One would think that it would end praising the King of Heaven. But instead, it ends, “But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever” (7:18)!

Not “the Holy One”, but “the holy ones”! Here is the recognition of All Saints Sunday! The people who have been called by the Ancient One and who give their loyalty to the Son of Man become “the holy ones” – the saints and souls of the world who receive the Kingdom that is the dominion of the Son of Man. They now live in, embrace and possess that kingdom as God’s gift to all humanity, and thus they will live in it as the liberated and redeemed ones “forever and ever”!

Psalm 149 is an unusual psalm. It is one of the collection of the five psalms that concludes the Psalter (Psalms 146-150). They all begin with the words, “Praise the Lord” and were likely used for the opening of a festive season in Israel. If so, this psalm would likely be the one used to begin Israel’s ancient celebration of their new year which centered on the annual ceremony of the enthronement of God as King of the Universe (and before the Babylonian exile, the annual celebration of the enthronement of Israel’s king as God’s emissary on earth).

The psalm divides into three parts. Verses 1-3 summons Israel to praise, and thus to gather for the celebration of their new year and of God’s enthronement. Verses 4-5 present reasons for praising God, and verses 6-9 calls Israel to national action in regards to all the other (non-Yahweh-believing) nations of the world.

That national action, of course, is what stuns the modern reader of the Psalm. “Let the high praises of God be in (Israel’s) throats, and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgment decreed” (vss. 6-9a)! What the Psalmist is saying is that Israel’s warriors should come forth from this annual celebration with

God's praises on their lips and their sword in their hands, ready to go forth to conquer other nations! In other words, this is "holy war"!

Of course, this expresses more wishful thinking than actual capacity! This psalm was likely written at the time of or immediately following the Babylonian captivity, so the vanquished Judah wasn't going to conquer anybody! But there is nothing like patriotism to keep one's hopes lifted up!

The author of this psalm probably realizes the dangerous direction in which he is going, because he offers a corrective at the very end of the psalm. Psalm 149 concludes, "This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the Lord" (149b)! The Psalmist deftly turns the focus of action from Israel's warriors to the God of Israel. It is not so much that Israel's warriors will be God's vengeance upon the nations of the world as it is that God is a just God and in God's good time that the judgment here decreed will be enacted by God in God's own way. In this way, hope and confidence is kept alive among the Hebrew people, when they are surrounded by defeat and despair!

Although the last part of the psalm offends today's reader, the first part does have at least one lovely gem in it. Verse four states, "For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory". God takes pleasure in us! It is a great thought to realize that God rejoices in having created us. It is clear from the context that such pleasure does not come about because we are so attractive, faithful or obedient. The pleasure God takes in us is at God's initiative. God rewards us for being obedient to God's call to us (4b), but such obedience is not necessary as a pre-condition for his love. As parents rejoice in their infant child and love that child before that child has done anything to deserve such love, so God rejoices in us and loves us – not for what we do but for who we are – God's child! God already loves us, and takes pleasure in us as an inevitable outcome of God's grace in action! Therefore, the Psalmist instructs us, "Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches" (vs. 5)!

Luke 6:20-31. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is committed to the bringing in of the kingdom of God (the shalom community). This kingdom will bring in its wake a grand reversal in which poverty and systems of domination will be eliminated and humanity will become all that God intended it to be. This reversal will occur through the intervention of Jesus as the one bringing about jubilee. Through his life and ministry, his empowering of people, his confrontation of the systems, his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus will set the stage for the resurrection of humanity into "the world as God intended".

Evidence for the above assertion is displayed throughout the Gospel of Luke. The focus of Luke is on demonstrating that Jesus is a man for the people – the "little ones" of the earth who hold no political, economic, social or religious power, who are marginalized and often oppressed by the systems of societal power. To them, Jesus brings the good news of a new and just kingdom – the kingdom of God.

The clearest indication that Luke's Gospel is committed to the jubilee is in the Gospel Lesson for All Saints Sunday – Luke 6:20-31. It is Luke's unique handling of the Beatitudes. In the Sermon

on the Mount, Matthew records Jesus as saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Again, “blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt. 5:3, 6). But Luke remembers Jesus’ words quite differently. He records Jesus as saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Lk. 6:20-21).

The difference is marked. Not “blessed are the poor in spirit”, but “blessed are you poor”. Not “blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness”, but “blessed are you hungry”. Not “blessed are those who mourn”, but “you who weep”! The emphasis is entirely different. Whereas Matthew is concerned with the spiritual condition of people (“poor in spirit”, “hunger after righteousness”), Luke is concerned with the physical, political and economic condition of the people (“poor”, “hunger”, “weep”). And to change the “blesses” from “the poor”, “those who hunger or mourn” to “you poor, you hungry, you who weep” shifts the emphasis from talking about people of need to talking to the people themselves!

Then, just to be sure that the reader has no doubts about the intent of Luke, this writer records the next saying by Jesus that do not appear in Matthew at all. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for this is what their ancestors did to the false prophets” (vss. 24-26). Those who now live in the luxury and power of the establishment, Jesus is saying, will someday see their status and role reversed. The rich will be made poor, the full will be hungry, those who presently experience the exquisite enjoyment of the most luxurious refinements will someday be broken and will mourn for what they have lost, for those whom the systems now embrace will someday be rejected by all.

What is clearly being proclaimed by Jesus in this Gospel Lesson is the upside-down nature of God’s kingdom. There will be a great reversal, Jesus proclaims in Luke. For the day will come when wealth and food will be redistributed, and those who currently enjoy the bounty of life will be destitute while those who are now oppressed and exploited will be on top – all because the wealthy and powerful would not share their wealth and influence (as Deuteronomy required) in order to bring about an equitable leveling of society.

But is what Jesus is teaching here simply a total reversal? Do his words mean that all rich will someday be made poor, all the powerful will one day be oppressed, that those who now dominate the world will one day be dominated? Is this simply a “tit-for-tat” world? No, that is oversimplifying what Jesus is saying. And that is made clear in his next statement.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you” (vss. 27-30).

What Jesus is suggesting is not a simple reversal of the rich becoming poor in God's kingdom while the poor become rich. What Jesus is actually doing here is indicating what the consequences will inevitably become if Israel's rich and powerful continue to live as the rich and powerful without acting intentionally to share their wealth and power with the poor, so that their situation is significantly modified. As one organizer who works among the third world urban poor once put it to a group of wealthy Christians, "You ignore the poor at your own peril!" That is, if one lives life preoccupied with building one's wealth and power, the one sure thing that can be guaranteed is that this wealth and power will someday be taken from him or her. If, on the other hand, those whose privilege it is to have wealth and exercise power accept that responsibility with sobriety and seek to find ways to love, do good, bless and give away much of that wealth, they will both contribute to the wellbeing of the poor and powerless and will more firmly secure their position in life.

Clearly the content of the Gospel of Luke acts out Jesus' commission in Luke 4:18-19. A story such as today's Gospel Lesson is the taught and lived-out reality of Jesus' mission call. His commission is to bring good news to the poor, to seek the release of the captives, to bring sight to the blind, to work for the liberation of the oppressed and to insist upon the full implementation of jubilee so that wealth is effectively redistributed and poverty eliminated. According to Luke, Jesus' work was the work of the Messiah reestablishing jubilee throughout Israel and perhaps even the world. And that does not happen unless the rich and powerful begin to act intentionally to share their wealth and to use their influence to make justice abound for the poor, marginalized and powerless of their society. Otherwise, they will soon discover that rather than being blessed, they will receive the woes of life!

Ephesians 1:11-23 is the Lectionary Epistle Lesson for All Saints Sunday for Cycle C. But in order to fully appreciate the profound message Paul is presenting in this passage, we must look at it from its wider context.

Ephesians 1:11-23 actually begins with the third verse of this chapter. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul asks and answers the question, "Why do we, as Christians, exist? Both as the church and as individual Christians, what are we called by God to be and do?" He begins answering that question by presenting a comprehensive picture of what it is that God has done for every Christian. And what he writes is amazing.

First, God "*chose us* in Christ before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

Second, God "*adopted us* as his children through Jesus Christ" (vs. 5).

Third, God *redeemed us* "through (Christ's) blood" and *forgave us* "our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us" (vss. 7-8).

Fourth, God has "*made known to us the mystery of his will*" – that is, what we are called by God to do as God's adopted and redeemed children (vs. 9).

Fifth, God has "*marked (us) with the seal of the Holy Spirit*" (vs. 13).

But why did God do all this for us? Why did God choose us, adopt us, redeem and forgive us, make his will known to us and fill us with the Holy Spirit? Paul answers that we Christians have been thus encountered and engaged by God so that we can participate in God's "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (vs. 10).

We read over these words without giving them any significant thought. But for first century Jewish and Gentile readers, these words were pregnant with meaning. The phrase "things in heaven and things on earth" is not a rhetorical statement to Paul. This is the term he coined and then used throughout many of his letters to refer to the political, economic and religious institutions of Rome ("things on earth") and their matching principalities and powers in the spiritual realm ("things in heaven").

To better understand what Paul is talking about in this passage and in any other scripture when he talks about "principalities and powers", one must understand how Jewish and Gentile people in the first century A.D. perceived their world. To Jew and Gentile alike, the world of the physical and the world of the spiritual were closely intertwined. To ancient humanity, what might happen in the heavenlies would profoundly and even inevitably impact what occurred on earth, and what might happen on earth would influence heaven. That understanding of reality was what enabled Paul to teach that Christ would someday reign over all the affairs of the earth (e.g., Phil. 2:10-11). Because Christ already reigns with God the Creator in heaven, it is a foregone conclusion that he will rule on earth as well.

Because Paul believed there was an open door between the spiritual world and physical world, he held that the governance of both worlds was also inevitably linked. Thus Paul would build his theology of "the principalities and powers" on the premise that what happens in the spirit world has its counterpart on earth. Therefore, the principalities and powers are not solely spiritual forces of heaven and of hell at war with each other. Nor are the principalities and powers simply the political, economic and religious systems of human society. The principalities and powers are both spiritual and earthly, with the heavenly or "hellish" dimension of that power providing the spiritual power that would drive the performance and provide the power to any earthly system.

So what Paul is actually presenting at the beginning of both the epistle lesson for today and its preceding verses is the challenge that the essential mission of the church is to work for the transformation of the world into God's kingdom. In essence he is saying, "The universe is at war – a war between God and the powers of darkness symbolized by Satan. As emissaries of God, the angels are to wage that war against Satan in the heavenlies. And likewise you, the church, are to be engaged in the same warfare with the political, economic and religious systems of Rome, which are the mirror image of those spiritual powers. To wage that war is why God chose you, called you, adopted, redeemed and forgave you, and that is why you have been given the power of the Holy Spirit".

Near the end of Paul's life, the church was facing intense persecution from Rome, and their temptation was to make themselves as invisible as possible in order to avoid that persecution. But Paul's call to the church was not to "hunker down" under such persecution, but to refuse to

be intimidated and instead to engage fearlessly in public life. We are to be about winning people to Christ, confronting political systems, transforming economic systems with God's economy of equity, and converting religious (or values-creating) systems to the true value found in Christ. Paul is not suggesting that our involvement in public life is optional or tangential to the purpose, work and life of the church. Instead, he is declaring that *involvement in public life is what the church is to be all about!* The church is to be involved in public life as its essential mission. It exists for the world! And to settle for anything less is to be unfaithful to Christ and his gospel!

This, of course, is an overwhelming task. The church of the first century was so little – and Rome was so large. In today's epistle lesson, therefore, Paul bursts into prayer for his beloved Christians throughout the Roman Empire. He prays that they may know the hope to which God has called them and the "immeasurable greatness of his power" (Eph. 1:17-19). Paul's prayer is the prayer of a father who is facing his own death – a prayer for his children who without him must now face the powers of Rome, the dangers of betrayal and the undertaking of an apparently impossible task. So he prays that they will be filled with God's power for the awesome task ahead of them – a power that will give them spiritual discernment, the capacity never to lose the awareness of what God has already done for them in Christ, the determination that they must never "take their eyes off the prize" of an empire won to Christ and the conviction that they are a people of power because they belong to the Lord of all power.

Emboldened by this prayer, Paul then moves into the most astounding statement of this letter – a proclamation that would guarantee that the church would win the enmity of Rome.

"God has put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:20-23).

Having reminded the church in his prayer that we Christians are people of God's power, Paul elaborates on the power of God that the church can access as it engages Rome. The power of God is such, Paul states, that God raised Jesus from the dead and has crowned him the monarch of heaven and earth, ruling over every government, head of state, constituting powers of that state and all its territories. Of course, Paul is clearly referring to the Roman Empire.

To Christians living in the first century, this was clearly and unequivocally an *extreme political statement*. Ephesians 1:20-23 would have been read by any Christian, and also by any Roman, from the standpoint of the cosmology that an action in heaven would make inevitable its eventual occurrence on earth. Therefore they would immediately see that the following is what Paul was actually declaring.

"God has crowned Jesus as the emperor of heaven. God has already seated Jesus upon the throne and has already placed him over all nations and empires ("thrones" or "rule"), all rulers ("principalities" or "authorities"), all governments ("powers"), and all their territories ("dominions"), both in heaven and on earth, both now ("this age") and as God's will is inevitably worked out through all generations and governments that are to come ("the age to come")."

What Paul so boldly proclaimed is that Christ has already been crowned king over all nations, economies and civilizations that do now or will eventually exist. Or, in other words, Paul is here declaring that ***Jesus is the true Caesar of the entire world – including Rome!*** The man in Rome who presently calls himself “Caesar” is an imposter!

Now do you see why the Christians were persecuted? The real offense that the Christians were to Rome was not that they were of another religion but that they declared that their Lord was the true and authentic ruler (or “Caesar”) of the world. They recognized Jesus as their Caesar, rather than Nero. And that made them a threat to the future of the Roman Empire.

But Paul is not done. He continues, “(God) has made (Jesus) the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). Here Paul is declaring that the means by which Jesus will become the ruler over all the Romes of the world (“the head over all things”) is through God’s use of the church. *The church will be the means* God will use to win the world to allegiance to Jesus. Therefore the church is to work to bring to reality in society what has been preordained because it has already been accomplished in heaven. If the church is faithful in fulfilling this assignment, the world will experience “the fullness of him who fills all in all”.

Paul declares that the church – this little band of apparently helpless “nobodies” – has been chosen by God to be God’s means for bringing about the submission of Rome to Christ. Such submission will not happen by the church aping the dominating use of power that the Roman systems use to tyrannize the world. They are not to field a mighty army! Rather, the defeat of Rome will happen as the church seeks to influence those systems through its practice of justice with love as it engages the systems through its use of relational power. We are called by God to be change agents in the world. But we will be so used by God only to the degree the church actively involves itself in working for justice and transformation in the public arena. That is the message that the old Paul approaching his own death has on All Saints Sunday for his beloved church!

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