

Celebration of All Saints –Year A – 11.1.20 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 134: 1-10, 22, 1 John 3: 1-3, Matthew 5: 1-12

It is said in the language of flowers and herbs that rosemary symbolizes remembrance. In the language of the feasts and fasts of the Church year, All Saints, like rosemary is for remembrance. It is the day that has been set aside for centuries as the day when we remember those who have gone before us in faith. Of course, those of our loved ones and friends who have died, we remember throughout the year, daily, or at least frequently when something nudges us to remember. An event, a scent, a special food or meal. The Feast of All Saints is the church's way of nudging us to remember with intention the saints, those who have died and the saints who still live. We remember those who were in their lifetime and after famous and those known only to God and to each of us. In the Epistle to the Hebrews the unknown author speaks of every human as being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. I do love that image, because it so clearly expresses the sense I have that those I have loved and who have died are still very much a part of my life, very much still with me. The bond of love cannot be broken even by death.

That cloud of witnesses surrounding us is of course an image. It is a way of expressing that which is unknown, that which we are unable to know in concrete reality. This past summer, a beloved family member died. In speaking of her death with one of my step sons, he remarked that he took comfort in the thinking about the grand party that happened in heaven when Martha arrived and was reunited with her brother. He laughed thinking about the good-natured arguments that would take place just as they had when both were alive. That too is an image, a comfort, and a way of envisioning that which we cannot know in fact but what we believe in faith.

I enjoy reading the biographies of the saints, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the more obscure and unknown saints, Hilda, Frederick Douglass, Monnica, Charles Gore, Juan de la Cruz, and countless others. People of whose lives most of us are unaware. What fascinates me and gives me hope is the fact that none of the saints lived blameless lives. None of them were, well particularly "saintly" as we might describe it. They were people who lived their lives where ever they were and in whatever circumstances they found themselves. What made them saints was that they lived those lives according to the commandment to love God and love neighbor and they did it in real and specific ways. There was much in their lives to be forgiven, things done and left undone. On occasion they were misguided, made mistakes and then made mid-course corrections turning from what they had done to a new way of being. They did this not once but many times. The saints were human—just as you and I are human.

The feast of All Saints is really a twofold feast. Today, November 1st focuses on those saints who we know, those who are famous more or less. Tomorrow, November 2nd is the Feast of all the Faithful Departed, when we celebrate those who are largely unknown to the world at large, who may only be known to a small circle of friends and family. We all have them in our lives, people who, because of their faith and the way in which they lived that faith showed us what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. You will find in your bulletin a long list, which in reality is only a very short list of some of those people.

Some years ago, I was working in a parish that had many children. It was the custom on the first Sunday of each month for me to gather the children around near the altar for a "children's sermon". In truth these were some of the most popular of my sermons with the adults as well. At any rate, on this particular first Sunday in November we were celebrating All Saints. I gathered the children and asked who among them had older brothers and sisters. Many hands went up. I

then made what to them was an astounding statement. “Do you know,” I said, “that those brothers and sisters are saints?” Imagine the looks on their faces. The younger were disbelieving, the older had smiles of condescension and even a bit of smugness. As if to say, “see, I told you”. Then came the zinger. I asked how many had younger brothers and sisters. Again many hands. “They too, are saints,” said I. What a reversal, the older siblings were disbelieving, the younger siblings felt vindicated. And the adults in the congregation laughed.

The truth is that we are all saints, by virtue of our baptism and the promises we made and make each time we renew our baptismal vows. What makes a saint is the willingness to live our lives in honest effort to follow Jesus. The instruction manual for sainthood is simple. The Great Commandment of love, the promises of the baptismal covenant and those beatitudes, which were today’s Gospel. Love and the effort to make the world we inhabit a better and more holy place are the attributes of a saint. Saints are not just those who have led exemplary lives but all of us, not only the faithful departed but the faithful still here.

Come now and join with me as once again we renew the promises made for us or which we made for ourselves when we were baptized.