

November 2, 2008
All Saints Sunday (Matthew 5:1-12)
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.
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THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

This is beatitude, a statement of blessing, a hope and a promise. What could be better when we are in mourning than that we shall be comforted? The very promise itself is something of a comfort. The beatitudes which we have heard today and which begin the Sermon on the Mount are more than promises for the weakest among us: those who mourn and the peacemakers, the meek and the merciful. The beatitudes are more the constitution of the new Israel, the new humanity that God brings into being in Jesus. They are to function much as the *Torah* functioned for the Israelites.

The group of slaves who remembered that God had brought them out of bondage in Egypt was originally a kind of stateless underclass known as something like the '*apiru*. They were formed into a people—the Hebrews—in the wilderness. What gave this people identity was *Torah*, the law. And the law marked them out as different from the peoples of the surrounding nations. They were people who remembered and served the God who had brought them out of bondage and no other. They were a people whose constitution made them into a community marked by justice for everyone, with particular attention to the most vulnerable: the widow, and the orphan and the stranger or wayfarer.

In time, as we know, and as still happens today, the law became a means of control by one well-meaning group of people over another. The law became something other than a reminder of the constitution of a just community walking in the light and grace of God. The law became more a toll and means of government. When times were good the people forgot their constitution as a people of justice, even as the prophets urged them to remember who they are and to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God.

In the time of Jesus, the rich young ruler was someone with the means and leisure to fulfill all the commandments, a kind of personal accomplishment and a kind of self-righteousness. Jesus told him that he lacked one thing and that was to sell all he had and give it to the poor and to become a follower of Jesus. And this that young man could not do. So Jesus, in effect, offers a new constitution for humanity in new and renewed relationship with God, one that cannot be achieved by human effort, but righteousness or right relation that can only be received in the nature of a gift. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*, and so on. Matthew constructs his gospel to make clear that this sermon is rather like a new *Torah* and these commandments only make sense in right relationship by the sheer unmerited, unearned, undeserved grace of God.

So today when we celebrate all the saints of ages past, and most especially those who have helped to shape our lives, we are celebrating a community of the living and the dead, across the world and down the ages. While we are continuing to try and live in the grace of God, so they—those who have gone before—are living fully in that grace which is the very definition of our hope.

I have an image of this reality of the communion of saints, this renewed constitution, that I would like to share with you and it comes from the church of my childhood. The church building was, in retrospect, really spectacular. It was St. Mary the Virgin in the village of Little Baddow. I sang in the choir of men and boys until I went off to boarding school at the age of nine and there is much that I remember from hours and hours in church, usually twice on any given Sunday. I remember the vestments that would distinguish the parish as ‘high church’ although I did not know that at the time. I remember the discovery of a mediaeval fresco that had been covered over at the time civil war. I remember the staircase leading up to an opening above the pulpit, large enough for a small person to perch. We were told it was for a beloved person from the village who contracted leprosy in the Middle Ages and who, by using this means of being separated from the congregation, was able to attend services. I remember the baptismal font being near the door of the church but don’t remember any baptisms as they usually took place on Saturdays in those days—although I must have been present at the baptism of my youngest brother in that church. But what I remember most and what fascinated me as I sat up in the choir was a tiny door, --maybe five feet tall that was behind the altar and which, if it was ever opened, would have led to the church yard and the cemetery. I thought a lot about that door and how it would have made people bow low as they passed by the altar and into the cemetery to join that great cloud of witnesses (of whose presence I was certain) to become part of the communion of saints that we heard about from time to time. This was not so much an image of heaven for me, but the sense that the whole universe was present in our worship. Our lives were marked by entry into the church through baptism and entry into that greater but invisible communion through death. I doubt I could have articulated that at the time, but it all just made sense in a way that was a matter of intuition rather than intellect.

Since those days I’ve thought more about the communion of saints, --something of a professional hazard serving one of the great parishes of the church called All Saints’—and find that my sense of the greater reality in which we live is confirmed over and over, but perhaps never more so than in the midst of a requiem on All Saints’ Sunday. Those of us who choose to follow Jesus, and who see the way of life in his self giving love and absolute integrity are part of something that makes sense of our lives and of the whole world. Today we remember those who have gone before and pray *requiem* for them, that they may rest in peace and rise in glory. And we also recognize anew our own sense of loss in the face of death, recalling us to our dependence on God alone for life. We come into the church through baptism and live our lives surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. There will come times for every one of when we bow low in humility remembering the source of our life, as if passing through a short door into a greater reality.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
In silence, let us pray....