

November 5, 2023  
Text: Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints' Day (observed)

Today we observe the Feast of All Saints, a day of giving thanks to God which that Church has commemorated for centuries and centuries. The main focus is on those saints, those Christians who have departed this life in faith and now rest in the arms of Jesus in heaven. At the same time, though, we recognize that the Church on earth is also made of saints, albeit those who are still struggling with their sinful flesh, living in a sinful world.

Our sermon hymn puts it well when we sing in the fourth stanza, "Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. Alleluia!" We saints on earth are joined to the saints in heaven together in Christ. Through the gift of faith, He has brought us into His one body, the Church.

This distinction and yet unity is seen in the Gospel reading appointed for All Saints' Day: the Beatitudes. As we look at these beautiful words of Jesus, we see how in this life, we have struggles, but joined to Him we are given blessing, both in this life and even more in the life to come.

So the Lord Jesus begins: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? It doesn't mean poor or lacking in the Holy Spirit, for having Him, the third person of the Holy Trinity, dwelling within you is only ever a blessing, only ever something to be desired richly, not poorly.

The poorness of spirit that Jesus is talking about here is an attitude of humility and dependence upon God. Someone who is great in spirit – their own spirit – wouldn't think that he needs God, that he's just fine on his own. Someone poor in spirit is utterly reliant upon God.

This is seen in Jesus, who though He was and is the Almighty God, didn't go about on this earth boasting of how great He was, but as the Scriptures say, "though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

The saints on earth follow in our Savior's footsteps, looking to God and God alone for all we need for this life and the life to come. We humble ourselves and repent of our sins, trusting ourselves to the mercy of God.

And our Lord hears these cries, and sends His Spirit into our hearts, to make His strength perfect in our weakness. He brings us into His Kingdom, not because of our greatness, but because we have been joined to His Son.

And when the day comes and our spirit is so weak that it finally leaves this body, it is taken to Heaven, where the fullness of the Kingdom is revealed. Those saints in heaven no longer have any poorness of spirit, for the Lord has supplied to them from His boundless riches, and they are in His Kingdom now and forever.

Jesus moves on to the next Beatitude: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." In this life, we mourn. We mourn because we are trapped in this sinful flesh, struggling against it, often falling into temptation because of it. We mourn as we feel and see the terrible effects of sin around us in

the world and in our loved ones. We mourn, because by faith we know that this isn't how it's supposed to be.

Pain, sadness, fear, death... this is not what the Lord God created us for. And He mourns it as well. What better picture of this could there be than the Lord Jesus mourning over the death of His dear friend Lazarus?

Jesus, of course, knows that He'll be raising Lazarus in a matter of minutes. He knows that He'll be dying on the cross to take away Lazarus' sin and bring him into eternal life with Him. But as He sees the great grief that Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha are enduring, and sees all the tears coming from Lazarus' many friends who have gathered, even He weeps over the brokenness that sin has brought into this world.

Yet Jesus would not mourn for long, but would indeed call Lazarus out of the grave, changing the people's tears of lament into tears of joy. It's as David wrote in the Psalms: "You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness."

In this life we mourn, yet we know that it will only be for a time. Our Lord has defeated sin and death upon the cross, and by His rising again has shown what awaits all His saints. We shed tears at the graves of our loved ones, mourning how death has separated us. But that separation is only temporary.

And for those in heaven, well, what better description of comfort could you have than our reading from Revelation this morning? "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The third Beatitude: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." When we think "meek" or "humble," we sometimes think of someone who lets himself be walked all over, who doesn't take a stand, who seeks above all else to make everyone else happy and never offend anyone.

This isn't the sort of meekness the Bible speaks of, though. The Bible, for instance, tells us that Moses was the meekest man who ever lived. Moses was no braggart. He never talked about how great he was, and the one time he did in anger take credit for doing something – providing water for the rebellious Israelites – it cost him his entrance to the Promised Land.

But Moses was no pushover. He went boldly before Pharaoh, the most powerful worldly ruler then on earth, and commanded him – not asked, told him – to let the Hebrews go. He did this, and everything else, in the confidence and boldness given to him by God's Word. Moses was meek – he didn't rely on who he was, but instead trusted and acted in confidence because of who God is.

The Lord Jesus showed this same meekness. Though He is God in the flesh, He allowed Himself to be treated terribly by those who ought to have trembled before Him. He was insulted, abused, spat upon, beaten, and finally crucified.

And yet when it came to the truth, Christ never backed down. The truth He came to proclaim, He proclaimed without hesitation or wavering. He is silent before the blaspheming Sanhedrin, until they demand in God's name if He is the Christ, at which point He declares: "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." His words there are clear as crystal, even as they are used by the Jews to finally condemn Him to death.

The saints on earth stand in this same meekness. We cannot and must not boast as though we are great in ourselves. But together with St. Paul, we boast in the Lord, in the great Word He has given us to speak and in the great deeds He has done for us and for all the world. We speak and act with confidence, not in ourselves, but in the Almighty God who has lovingly adopted us as His dear children and become our dear Father.

The Church's head is Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. His Kingdom is not of this world, meaning that it isn't made by this world or gets its power or authority from this world, but nevertheless it fills this world. His Word declares that "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and so there is nowhere that is "off limits" to His authority.

We have inherited the earth, meaning that the world and all its nations are under God's Word, and we are free – free! – to proclaim that Word boldly to anyone, anywhere. The Gospel is for all nations, not just those who are already Christians. All authority comes from God and is therefore subject to God – even those authorities that claim to be "secular."

And the day is coming when God's people, brought into His Kingdom through meek trust in His Word, will inherit the new heavens and new earth, dwelling with our Lord in perfection.

Next, Jesus declares, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." People in this world are always searching after something, always trying to find that which would satisfy their longings, make them feel fulfilled, complete. They look in so many places, pursue so many paths, worship so many idols. But they will all leave you empty, still longing, and worse off than when you started.

True satisfaction has only one source: the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Augustine, an early pastor, bishop, and teacher in the Church, put it beautifully when He wrote, speaking toward God, "you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you." Only Jesus and His righteousness bring fulfillment and meaning to our lives.

In this life, we still struggle with our sinful flesh which despises God and righteousness, constantly seeking to lead us elsewhere and put stumbling blocks before us. We hunger and thirst, longing for more of the Lord and the eternal blessings He gives, even as we give thanks for the gifts He continually gives.

In this longing, we are joined by our Lord Jesus, who in his earthly life hungered in this same way. He of course was perfectly righteous in Himself, and so He didn't hunger for His own sake. But He hungered for our sake. When His disciples asked Him if needed any food after He'd been speaking to a Samaritan woman at a well, Jesus replied, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work." He ate physical food and drank physical drink, for He was a man, but His food, where He drew His strength, was in doing His Father's will. The Father desires all people to be reunited with Him, to give them true satisfaction, and that is what the Son hungers for.

The saints in heaven are there because they were given that which truly satisfies. They ate and drank Jesus, the bread come down from heaven, the source of the living waters. And now, they are truly satisfied.

They rejoice at the throne of the Lamb, all their needs met, all their desires fulfilled, all the joys brought to completeness. As again we hear from Revelation: “He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.” Nothing else can satisfy like this. Only the Lord and His righteousness.

After this, Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Who is merciful, truly merciful, showing love and compassion even to his enemies? No person born of man. We, corrupted by sin, are instead spiteful, resentful, prideful. Merciful? Not us.

There is one who is merciful: God. In His mercy He comes to us and gives us forgiveness. We don’t deserve His goodness and blessing in the least, but out of His love He freely gives them to us.

Jesus came to this world out of mercy, shed His blood on our behalf out of mercy, makes us His saints out of mercy. It is because we have been shown this divine mercy that we can then give it to others. We can be merciful because He has first been merciful to us.

At the Last Day, we shall see the fullness of His great mercy toward us. All men will stand before the great judgment throne of God. On that day, there will be no one who has done enough to get into heaven, no one deserving of paradise. We all deserve to be condemned for our sins.

But in mercy, the Son has taken away our sins and covered us in His righteousness. This is our blessing, received by faith, which is then shown in mercy toward others. Thus, it isn’t as though this Beatitude is saying, “If you show enough mercy, you get God’s mercy at the end.” No, mercy is a fruit of faith, evidence that one truly does believe in Jesus. Being joined to Jesus, being made one of His saints by His mercy, is what ensures us of His mercy at the end of all things.

This Beatitude is related to the next one: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Here again, no one is by themselves pure in heart; the Scriptures are clear on this. After having cleansed the earth through the waters of the Great Flood, the Lord makes this observation: “The intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Note, that’s after the Flood, not before it.

Or through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord declares: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Man’s heart is dead as stone and totally evil apart from God. And thus God also declares that no man can look on Him and live; sin cannot exist in God’s presence.

But God doesn’t desire it to remain this way. He promises through His prophets that He will come and take our hearts of stone and give us living hearts, hearts that love and trust in Him, hearts that delight to do His will. That’s why Jesus came. He didn’t come just to give wise sayings in sermons that will help us live better lives and be kind to each other. He came to give His life for us and to us. His is the life we now live.

He is the One who creates a clean heart in us and renews in us a right spirit. This new heart then lets us see Him. In this life we see Him by faith, for instance in His Supper, where He physically comes to us in the bread and the wine. We see His hand at work in all the ways where He provides for us and protects us.

In the next life, when we have been purified from all sin, then we shall see Him in His full glory. As St. Paul writes, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” Our loved ones who died believing in Jesus, that’s what they see, even right now.

In the seventh Beatitude, Jesus teaches, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Our Lord continues the theme from the last two Beatitudes in this one. Peace is again a gift of God. Jesus tells His disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

Since the fall into sin, mankind has been at war with God, rebelling against our loving Lord and Father. We would do nothing to seek peace in this conflict, and so the Lord comes and becomes Himself the peace offering to bring the conflict to an end. At His birth the angels sang, “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men.” Again the Bible says, “For He Himself is our peace.” Jesus brought peace and reconciliation between God and man.

This peace isn’t just a peace of neighbors who get along fairly well. This is the peace between a father and a son, a peace born out of love, grounded in a reality that cannot be broken. Since we have this peace, we can share this peace with others. We can forgive those who wrong us. We can do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and we can do this even when they don’t do it unto us.

In this world that is full of turmoil, we can always find peace in Him. And when our time on this earth draws to a close, we are brought to His peace, His perfect peace, which never ends.

Our Lord’s wisdom is shown here, for the Beatitude on making peace is followed by two concerning trouble. Christ says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Those who are Jesus’ disciples will not have an easy life in this world. Those who cling to His righteousness and seek to walk in His ways will find themselves walking against the way of the world. And the temptation will be to go along with the world, to do what you know you shouldn’t and ask for forgiveness later.

Our sinful flesh equates having things go well and be easy as blessing. That’s what we think we should strive after, making things easy for ourselves. But this is actually a curse, a trap from the devil. Sure, if we give in just this one time, go along with this lie just once, it probably won’t destroy our faith. But it will make it easier for the next time. And the time after that. And pretty soon, it becomes a sin that can and does destroy faith.

Thus we are actually blessed when we are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, when we suffer for the sake of Jesus. Through suffering, our Lord refines our faith, like gold having impurities burned away in a refiner’s fire. When the load is heavy, then our faith is exercised and thereby strengthened, able to bear even greater burdens and able to help others in their weakness.

Being persecuted for righteousness’s sake is evidence that the righteousness of Christ dwells within you, and therefore you have that much more confidence that the Kingdom of Heaven has in fact been given to you. When we suffer as Christians for the sake of Christ’s Word and following Him, we are in good company, for we are walking the path that the prophets and apostles and Jesus Christ Himself walked.

We know where that path leads – to the golden streets and jewel lined walls of heaven itself. The way may be hard now, but it leads to paradise.

In the Beatitudes, then, our Lord both guides us along the path in this life and also gives us assurance that He is with us every step of the way. With our Lord Jesus leading us, with our Lord and Father watching over us, and with our Lord the Spirit dwelling within us, we journey onward to that day when we will be joined to all the saints whom we remember.

As we sang, “But, lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day: the saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of Glory passes on His way. Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Amen.