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Daniel 7:1-18

Ephesians 1:11-23

Sermon by Martin Wright

Who among us is truly holy? We Christians are supposed to be holy people. And one does meet Christians who are very obviously holy, whose charity and humility is an example to us all. But then again one meets Christians who are not quite like that, and the church in all its everyday pettiness does not often seem the most holy of places.

This week we celebrate All Saints, and it is a festival that confronts us with who we Christians truly are: a chosen people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, saints of God. And what an uncomfortable truth that is. But if the burden of sainthood seems great, the feast of All Saints also assures us that we do not have to bear it alone.

I made an interesting discovery preparing this sermon. The biblical word “holy”, and the New Testament word “saint” (which is just the same as “holy” in Greek), are virtually never applied to individuals. We don’t read about a “holy person” or a “saint of God”, but about “holy people” and “the saints”, always in the collective. It’s not a personal property or a matter of good conduct; these things may be evidence of holiness, but they do not make us holy. In fact it’s not really about our choice at all. We are holy simply because we are part of God’s holy people. We are holy because Jesus Christ has claimed us for his own, has marked each one of us with the seal of his promised Holy Spirit, and has appointed us as a body to be his body in the world. We are saints whether we like it or not.

The history of God’s holy people begins with the calling of Israel, which is illuminated for us in the most unlikely of places: in the middle of the book of Leviticus, which we never read. Between all the ritual prescriptions for slaughtering sacrifices and the legal codes of daily life, there is reiterated many times the phrase: “You shall be holy, for I your God am holy”. This sums up the purpose of the whole law. God calls Israel to be a reflection of his holiness, to show the world that Israel’s God is worthy of all worship and honour. They are set apart among the nations as a sign of the apartness of their God, with the ultimate object of drawing all nations together to worship the one God. This holiness occurs even in spite of Israel’s behaviour, for the many times that Israel decides they have had quite enough of being holy and would rather go back to a more easily manageable sort of god, the Lord just calls them back again; his calling is irrevocable. Once a holy people, always a holy people.

Another book of the bible that we don’t much read is Daniel. The part of Daniel that gives us today’s wonderful vision is written much later than the rest of the Old Testament, in fact only about 1½ centuries before Christ. It comes from a time in which the Jewish people were suffering terribly cruel persecution at the hands of their Greek overlords. The Greek king was determined that there would be no rival nations under his rule, and the Jews were forced to give up their religious practices; those who resisted were tortured and killed in the most gruesome ways. For the details read First and Second Maccabees.

Daniel's vision of the four beasts is about the passing away of earthly kingdoms and the establishment of the reign of God, a sign of hope to God's people that their suffering is not in vain. The four hideous beasts represent the four empires that in turn had authority over the Israelites, the last and most horrible being the arrogant Greek empire. When the Ancient One comes to take his throne, the beasts are killed or put aside, and the holy ones of God inherit the kingdom that is promised them.

This is an apocalyptic text, which tends to see good and evil in very black-and-white terms. So its view of earthly authority is stark: the kingdoms of humankind are simply evil. No ambiguity here; no reluctant co-operation with the authorities for the sake of the greater good. We may find this hard to stomach in the modern West, being used to a much more fuzzy line between good and evil, with several shades of grey. But the experience of persecution creates a wonderful clarity of vision. Daniel was able to see clearly that the holy people of God are inevitably involved in conflict: the principalities and powers that have this world in their grasp will not surrender it without a fight, and God's people will suffer.

It is vitally important for our comfortable, bourgeois church to keep reading these apocalyptic texts and keep this vision alive. Partly so that we might gain Daniel's clarity, to know the forces that enslave us when we meet them—and make no mistake, we do meet them every day, however subtly they may move in our age. And partly so that, when the time of testing comes to us, and we are called upon to stake our bodies on our faith, we might be equipped to stand fast.

Daniel is quite certain that the principalities and powers will pass away and give place to the kingdom of God. How striking it is, then, that the symbols of the kingdoms of humanity are four hideous beasts, while the symbol for God's kingdom is a human person: "I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven". It's easy to see in this figure the sort of Messiah that we find in the other prophets, but that doesn't seem to be quite what Daniel means. Rather, the "one like a human being" is a representative figure, a symbol of all the holy ones of God who will inherit the promised kingdom. He stands before the throne of the Ancient One on our behalf, and we are all taken up in him. He is also a representative before God's people of the grace and mercy that is offered to them.

In view of this, it is rather unfortunate that the NRSV translates the phrase as "one like a human being". The Aramaic actually says, "one like a son of man". It means the same thing in context, but it does make a difference, because the title "Son of Man" is adopted by Jesus Christ for himself. Christ understands himself to be the one who represents us before God, the one in whose holiness we share, and who holds out to us the promises of God. And it is no accident that when he uses this title of himself, he is usually talking about his suffering.

We are holy because Christ our God is holy. We are holy because we share in his suffering, and shall surely share also in his glory. We are holy because we are being transformed into his image, from one degree of glory to the next. We are holy because he has marked us as his own with the seal of his promised Holy Spirit.

So let us not lose heart. Whether we meet the principalities and powers in all their grim immensity, or more subtly in the ordinary grind of the world, let us keep before our eyes the vision of Daniel, the assurance that these kingdoms shall pass away and the kingdom of God shall come. And that we shall stand with Christ and in Christ,

before the throne of the Ancient One, with saints we have never known, saints as yet unborn, and saints we have loved, singing: “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord”.