

All Saints
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Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 7:8-17

Psalm 34

1John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Saint making - a process of endearment

The graphic on the OOS depicts an image from the book of Revelation. It is of the Lamb at the centre of the throne of God. The book of Revelation does not offer a timeless description of life in heaven. It was written to encourage the faithful in times of distress. John, who wrote around 96 AD expected persecution to break out, which would result in many dying martyrs deaths. His message is that the victory has been won. The Lamb, who has the power to break the seals on the book of life, stands at the centre as the victorious one who opened up for us the promise of life with God. When we read the book of Revelation, we tend to think it is about the end of the world. But John is not so much concerned with a particular moment that will be the end. Rather, his message is that the end has happened many times and will continue to happen as people wrestle with the eternal issues of life and death. What matters is that people who have caught sight of the vision he offers live now “as if” they are already citizens of the Kingdom of heaven.

In the early days of the Christian movement the church did indeed suffer persecution. Stories of faithfulness were collected and retold to encourage believers who were under pressure to live courageously “as if” they were already citizens of the Kingdom of heaven. One such was Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna who was martyred in February 155 AD. During his long lifetime Polycarp was an important Christian figure and defender of the faith in western Asia Minor. It is said he “had known John and the others who had seen the Lord.” The church at Smyrna loved him, and wrote a long account of his death.

Polycarp was arrested one evening at a farm outside Smyrna. He neither sought nor fled martyrdom but invited his captors to eat a meal for an hour while he prayed. He was taken into the city and led before the proconsul in the stadium, where a large crowd had assembled for the games. The proconsul urged him to forswear his religion: “take an oath by the emperor’s guardian spirit; curse Christ.” Polycarp answered: “I have served him for 86 years and he has done me no wrong, how can I blaspheme my king and saviour?” The proconsul continued to cajole and threaten Polycarp, but to no effect. The people yelled for the blood of the man whom they said “destroyed our gods.” Polycarp was ordered to be burned alive. He uttered a prayer of praise and glory to God, and when he had offered up himself and said Amen the fire was lit. “And the flames made a sort of arch, like a ship’s sail filled with the wind, and they were like a wall round the martyr’s body; and he looked, not like burning flesh, but like bread in the oven, or gold and silver being refined in a furnace.” Then the executioner was ordered to stab Polycarp to hasten his end [Penguin Dictionary of Saints].

Early in November, after the long haul through the “green” Sundays that follow Pentecost, we come to All Saints. The color and the mood changes and we find ourselves celebrating not one saint, but all of them: ancient and modern, quirky and sensible, well known and all but lost to memory.

The word saint means “holy one”. The problem with that is that it conjures up an image of someone who is capable of far more moral goodness than we ourselves could attain. It is good to notice that when he wrote to castigate the Corinthians for their various misdemeanours St Paul referred to them as saints [1 Cor 1:2]. Their holiness was not a matter of being sufficiently pure, or of having a required amount moral achievement. It was a description of something given to them: they had been claimed by God in Baptism and were subject to the grace of God at work in their lives.

The way Paul used the word saint really meant “practising believer” but it came to be reserved for those who manifested faith in special ways. Up to the time of the Reformation the saints were the martyrs who had witnessed to Christ through their deaths, or in some other way were recognised as having lived a holy life. It is easy to warm to someone as brave and faithful as Polycarp and to develop reverence for him and others like him. But after the Reformation Paul’s original usage came back into focus. Talk of particular saints declined and more stress was put on the saints as the community of believers – people who connect with Christ now.

If as Paul says, the saints are practising believers, they include members of congregations past and present, but that does not mean we focus solely on them, or solely on us. When in the Creed we declare our belief in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints we are pointing to the fellowship of the church in the biggest sense the word. The living fellowship of Christians, that stretches across the ages - all who passed through the same baptism, shared the same bread and wine, and lived and died in the hope of Christ. It is a way of pointing beyond ourselves, and of remembering those whom we have loved in life.

St John does not use the word saint. He speaks of us as children of God. “*See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God- and this is what we are... beloved we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we know is that we shall be like him*” [1 John 3: 1-2]. The love John speaks of is like a down payment we receive to get us going on the path of living in God’s love. And it represents a call to live now in anticipation of the fulfilment of the promise of that gift, which is still to come. What this really indicates is a process of growing up into the love of God. Peter Steele SJ speaks of this as “process of endearment” [*Bread for the Journey* p 73]. God endears himself to us, and seeks to endear us to him. How that spells itself out in life is that in return for receiving God’s love, we live our lives in endearment of God and one another. The process of making saints is a process of endearment.

We have heard Polycarp's story today. It is an endearing story but it is more than that. There are many temptations and disruptions that threaten the journey of the church. People like Polycarp help us to recapture the vision of what it means to live resolutely for Christ. One of the beauties of the church is that the scriptures, the hymns, the prayers, the liturgy and the memories of those who went before represent faces, lives and voices from this vast fellowship of endearment. They remind us of others who found their source and destination in God and kept their focus as they travelled this way. Their witness is a sign that in the daily business of engaging with the struggle between good and evil the victory has been won for us, and the outcome is assured. This is the strength that allows us to find our focus once more. This is what allows us to seek to live in endearment of God. The endearment that never ends.
