**All Saints Day** **Mark the Evangelist**
**1/11/2026**

**Revelation 7:9-17**
**Psalm 34:1-8**
**1 John 3:1-3**
**Matthew 5:1-12**

**Looking to Jesus**

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

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Yesterday the community paid a lot of attention to the celebrations of All Hallows Eve with decorations that have about as much connection to the saints of God as sleighs and trees have to the celebration of Christmas. It strikes me as a curious thing that with so much attention being given of late to family ancestral research that we aren't seeing more focus on this celebration of All Saints Day. The on-line resources have enabled Sue to discover minute details about the lives of family members many generations passed. Live to air television programs like "Who do you think you are" explore the ancestry of celebrities. And yet, with all this interest, Halloween gets community attention and All Saints Days doesn't even raise an eyebrow.

Today is All Saints Day - a feast day of the church whose earliest mention is in the writings of Ephrem Syrus who died in 373. By 407 it was celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost which is where it is still observed in Orthodox churches. The Western church moved it to 13 May 609 and then to 1 November by Pope Gregory IV prior to 844. It became a very handy day for remembering all the saints for whom there were no special days assigned.

The celebration of All Saints has come into Protestant consciousness relatively recently. So what is our expectation of observing All Saints Day. It is always on 1 November, and yet many churches pull into the nearest Sunday. It doesn't warrant a special civic holiday like Christmas. So what is expected of us in this celebration?

One place to look could be in the minds of those who determine the readings for the day in the three-year ecumenical lectionary. This gets a bit complex if all the readings get some attention – Hebrew Scriptures, Psalms, Epistles and Revelation, and the Gospels. Let's keep it simple and consider the Gospels. In the year of Matthew, the reading is the Beatitudes. In the year of Luke, the reading is the Beatitudes. But in the year of Mark, which gospel does not have any beatitudes, the reading is the raising of Lazarus in John's gospel with particular emphasis on the family and Jesus mourning his death.

We could surmise that the lectionary compilers would like the church to focus on those who mourn. The Beatitudes announce blessings on those who mourn, those who weep, and John tells of the family in mourning. So it is that on this celebration we remember those whom we mourn. For many of us that will include those whose lives of faith in Christ has impacted on our own lives and faith.

There is a reading that would be included in the lectionary anthology for All Saints if I were the compiler of the three-year lectionary – Hebrews 12 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses…'. How could it have been left out of our lectionary? Maybe because the focus is on us – the gaze of the witnesses is on us, not us on them. Maybe because of the horrific list of sufferings the witnesses endured at the tail end of chapter 11. Indeed, these witnesses are martyrs. The Greek for witness is μάρτυρας (*martyras*). English translations of the New Testament never render this as

‘martyr’ but this is an occasion when it would be appropriate. A good time to remember that witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ is a risky business.

My questions are prompted by our Hebrews reading. The text evokes a word picture. The scene is an athletics arena – ‘… let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us…’ – the ancient athletes stripped of their clinging clothing. The witnesses are in the stands watching. They are looking at us as we run. And what might they see? The writer of the letter instructs that the cloud of martyrs will see the runners (Hebrews 12:2) ‘looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.’

I guess this holds the clue as to why the cloud-of-witnesses text doesn’t get a go in the All Saints lectionary. It is not about the witnesses who have gone before. It is about us. Because the witnesses witnessed and are looking at us, we who are running the race are to respond as people, who like them, are faithful to Jesus. The text kind of deflects the attention away from the saints that this celebration invites us to remember. Yes, but I would hope that this celebration is not just a focus on the loved ones gone before, to assist our grief, to remind us to be grateful of our inheritance from them. Each Christian celebration is to evoke a change in us – to draw us on in faithful obedience.

Yes, we look to the saints, our own cherished ones who have lived among us and who are now dead. We remember with thanksgiving the examples of faith in Christ that they set us, but their example surely prompts a response from their inspiration to examine our own faith journey. How is our race running? The cloud of witnesses, the cloud of martyrs reminds us that for the saints in the letter to the Hebrews, the race of faith was perilous. Looking to Jesus and choosing the way of faith is perilous as it was for the cloud of martyrs. It is a call to lay aside the sin that clings to lay aside greed, to lay aside seeking power advantage, to lay aside motives of political expediency. ‘[L]ooking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith…’

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