

Sunday of All Saints, 6 November 2016

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10, 13-14; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 6:20-36

St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman OK

A story is told about a Sunday School class where the teacher asked the children "Who is a saint, what makes someone a saint?" Various answers came back. "The people in the Bible." "Someone who never gets mad or loses their temper or says anything mean." "Someone who floats around in heaven on a cloud with a harp and a halo."

One of the children, thinking of the stained-glass windows in the church, said "A saint is someone with the light shining through them."

A Saint is someone with the Light shining through them.

Maybe with a few cracks in the glass; maybe with a few cobwebs in the corners, or some dust on the panes. But the light shines, despite the imperfections. Maybe the imperfections even become a way of showing the light.

When I lived in Georgia, I said mass every Thursday morning for the Sisters of the Order of St. Helena, an Episcopal women's monastic community nearby. One morning as I walked into the chapel the sunshine was pouring through the windows high up in the wall. The room glowed. I realized that I was seeing the sunbeams flooding in, because of the dust in the air. I could perceive the sun's rays down the length of that long, high, austere room, only because there was dust in the air. If the room had been perfectly sterile, with no dust at all, I would not have seen the light in the same way. I was able to see the light through, and because of, the dust.

The seventeenth-century Anglican priest and poet George Herbert pondered the spiritual truth of this strange reality in a poem he titled "The Windows":

Lord, how can a man preach thy eternal word?

He is a brittle crazy glass:

Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford

This glorious and transcendent place,

To be a window, through thy grace.

But when thou dost anneal in glass thy story,

Making thy life to shine within

The holy Preacher's: then the light and glory

More rev'rend grows, and more doth win:

Which else shows wat'rish, bleak, and thin.

Doctrine and life, colors and light, in one

When they combine and mingle, bring

A strong regard and awe: but speech alone

Doth vanish like a flaring thing.

And in the ear, not conscience, ring.

The poet asks God: "How can I, how can anyone, dare to speak for you?" We are brittle, cracked, covered in cobwebs outside and dust within. And yet...and yet. "Thou dost him afford this...place, to be a window, through thy grace."

When the light of God shines through the particular life of an individual person, in word and action, attitude and behavior, "Doctrine and life, colors and light, in one/when they combine and mingle, bring /a strong regard and

awe.” Speech alone, fine words even about Jesus or the Bible or great matters of faith, are not enough by themselves. To use a contemporary idiom, talk is cheap.

There must be what Herbert calls the “annealing” (which means to bake the color into the glass to make it permanent)—a bringing together of the life of God with the life of the person, the particular human being, in word and example, so that the light can shine through, with that very particular color and brilliance.

Today we celebrate the feast of All Saints. We give thanks for God’s holy ones throughout time, the names we know from scripture and history, and the ones we cherish in our inmost hearts and memories. The great ones are remembered by many, as the writer of Ecclesiasticus enumerates them: Let us sing the praises of famous men (and women) who did great and celebrated deeds in their day. Some (perhaps most) are known only to a few, or none at all. And yet Jesus, in the gospel, tells his hearers that greatness and significance in the dominion of God doesn’t look like we might think. Blessed (“happy”) are you who are poor, Jesus says, and hungry, and weeping, and shamefully treated—for God loves and desires you especially. You who have plenty of everything, and need nothing—God finds it very hard to reach you in your self-satisfaction. The holy ones, the blessed ones, the set-apart ones, are often the strange ones, the oddballs, one way or another. They’re different...the light shines through them, cracks and dust and cobwebs and all.

Today we have brought icons of remembrance—pictures, objects, outward and visible signs of those whom we know and love as one of “God’s own people”, as the letter to the Ephesians calls them. The ones through whom the light has shined on and for us, sometime in our lives. We have placed them on the altar of remembrance, to encounter again the great cloud of witnesses who have walked with us along the way, and now are cheering us on from the grandstand as we continue our own earthly walk of faith.

So now, take a moment in the privacy of your own mind.  
Close your eyes and sit comfortably.  
Remember a time when you were in the company of one of the saints,  
who brought you into the light of God.  
Who brought that light to you.  
Perhaps they were a bit cracked, or dusty,  
but they shined with the light that God shined on them.  
They were sinners, welcoming other sinners  
in the forgiveness into which Jesus welcomed them.  
The Holy Spirit breathed through them,  
to give breath and life to everyone nearby.

They lived not only in ages past...