

All Saints' Day  
Revelation 21.1-6/Colossians 1.9-20/John 11.32-44  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
5 November 2006

**“MAKING SAINTS”**

~Paul H. Friesen~

Well, today we finally celebrate All Saints' Day. Like many Anglican parishes and like many other churches across the country we have transferred today's worship focus on 'all the Saints' from Wednesday, the first day of November, its proper date, to today when we could all be present. All Saint's Day, if you didn't know, is the reality behind the candy extravaganza we call 'Halloween', which is still having its affect upon the younger members of my own household.

All Saints' Day (a.k.a. All Hallows' Day), was an ancient, creative and popular Christian celebration centuries before – centuries before the previous evening (All Hallows' Even) was slurred into the word 'Halloween' and the celebration was reduced to what we enjoyed this past Tuesday evening.

Now who can blame children for dressing up as polar bears or princesses, and breaking through the reserve of complete strangers with their little outstretched hands? Who can blame adults for donning disguises and enjoying parties? I certainly can't blame them!

But—Christians should think twice before they agree to forget the Christian calendar of their ancestors while they are caught up with the limited joys of Halloween, or any other commercial holiday—most especially what Christmas and Easter have become. Certainly our ancestors did more than shrug at the pagan carnivals of the ancient Roman Empire in which many of them lived.

The ancient church claimed the days and weeks in the name of their Saviour, Christ: Sunday (the Lord's Day), also the Christian Seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost), and special days in the middle of the week too—like All Saints' Day. They claimed these as days of worship and celebration.

But the early Christians didn't lean on government legislation to make their worship comfortable or convenient. They paid the price, gladly, of worshipping their God in the cold and the dark and at odd hours. This is how they resisted assimilation into the mindless mass culture of their day which was driven by entertainment in the arena, and thoughtless leisure.

The early Christians disciplined themselves to worship according to the rhythms of their faith, and this finally flourished in the art and colour and beauty of our Christian calendars and our buildings and our theology and our poetry—and in all the other forms of the creativity of our Christian ancestors. They knew above

all that time was a gift of God, and today is a day when they remind us of it. We cannot worship God unless we are together in one place on a shared day. Thank God that we are today!

All Saints' Day is the king or queen of the saints' days. But we don't worship Saints on this day! We thank God for all of them. And we praise God that we are in their company.

It would seem that All Saint's Day first began as a sort of 'All Martyrs' Day' in the fourth century. This was a few decades after the last great political persecution of the early church had taken the lives of so many, many Christians whose names had already been forgotten but whose lives were still celebrated. 1200 years ago, in Western Europe, All Saint's Day was finally settled on a new and permanent date, November 1, where it still is today.

All Saints' Day became an annual recollection of all saints, named or unnamed, whether martyrs or not, a recollection we honour today. It is a day we need to make our own day, in every generation.

It is important for us, who keep All Saints' Day today, that we are connected, through Christ, to the saints of all ages. We confess in the Creeds our membership in the 'communion of saints' and that we belong to the 'one holy, catholic (not 'Roman Catholic' but 'universal')—'one holy, catholic and apostolic church,' the church of all ages. The names on the plaques on our walls and the faces in the glass surround us like the 'cloud of witnesses' in the book of *Hebrews*, in our New Testament.<sup>1</sup> And all of here today, with our names on tags—we are all saints, today, surrounded by saints. This is the truth!

Our reading from the book of *Revelation* tells us how it is possible that we are all saints. It is quite simple: it is God who makes us saints.

But what is a saint? In his letters to the Christian communities St. Paul usually addresses them in the opening words as 'saints'. The few times he doesn't he calls them a 'church'. The original words mean close to the same thing. He addresses all Christians as those 'set apart' or 'called out'. This ought to surprise us, as some of these churches to whom St. Paul wrote were in a sad, sinful, dysfunctional condition when the Apostle wrote them, and he openly criticizes some of their members for astonishing moral lapses. Yet they are all saints to St. Paul!

The explanation is in the word. To be 'holy', to be a 'saint', is to be set apart by God. It is to be named as a special target of God's love. God loves the whole world, indeed!

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<sup>1</sup> *Hebrews* 12.1

But for us to be set apart by God's love is to be set apart to share God's love. Saints are an extension of God's love for the world to those around them. This is how the great truth is put in the book of *Revelation*, in the vision that St. John receives of the future of the human race. It shows how the whole world one day will be 'sainted'—how the world will one day be made 'holy.'

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 'See the home of God is among mortals, He will dwell with them; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.'*<sup>2</sup>

This is all the more surprising because in the first part of the book of *Revelation* St. John described the depth of human depravity as found in the Roman Empire (a.k.a. 'Babylon') how anything could be bought or sold, even (as the author put it)—even 'human bodies and souls.'<sup>3</sup> And so God's promise of one day making the whole world the target of his love is greeted with astonished joy.

The 'new Jerusalem' is described by the great African bishop, St. Augustine, in these words: 'The world remade into something better [by God], will become fit for people now remade.'<sup>4</sup> This is the promise of re-creation, of our full redemption.

On the other hand, this promise of global holiness is not what we might call a 'natural development'. We are not further ahead, sadly, than we were a thousand years ago. 'The city of God is not at the end of human progress,' says the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, '[it doesn't wait] at the end of history by a sort of accumulation of the works of man.'<sup>5</sup> Unlike the city of Babel, which the human race attempted, arrogantly, to build up to the heavens, the 'new Jerusalem' descends down to earth from God.

The wonderful truth is that God's presence with us is what makes us holy—God's love rubs off on us in his company! *The home of God is with mortals...He will dwell with them.* This is not a new idea. God, we hear, walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve before they rejected divine company. And in words very much like the ones from *Revelation* God promises his presence to the Israelites in the Promised Land at the other end of the wilderness. 'I will place my dwelling in your midst...And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people'—this we hear in the book of *Leviticus*.<sup>6</sup>

And centuries after this the prophet Ezekiel looked forward to the same new Jerusalem that St. John did in the same wonderful words: 'My dwelling place

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>3</sup> *Revelation* 18.13, alternate translation, footnote, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>4</sup> *De Civitate Dei* (XX.xvi) as translated in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Revelation*, ed. William C. Weinrich (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p.353.

<sup>5</sup> *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, trans. George C. Shreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977), p.214-215.

<sup>6</sup> *Leviticus* 26.11-12

shall be with them; and I will be their God and they will be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify...'<sup>7</sup> The Lord is the one that makes saints, the one who that makes us holy.

Christians believe that God has been with us from the beginning. They confess that in the future, God will re-create his world as God once recreated it, to fully share his holiness, to be marked by God's love. This is their sure and certain hope.

In between creation and re-creation is what we call human history. Within human history God's people are the sign of God's holiness. We may be poor signs of God's holiness, God's presence, God's sanctifying love, but we are what God has given himself to work with, the means that God has to make the world holy. There is no second option for God our maker; God has no 'plan B'. We are the saints.

Christians do confess that Jesus Christ is with them in this world, with them as they live in hope of the New Jerusalem.

But...In the Gospel story Mary said: 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died.' It is for us a reminder that short of the New Jerusalem, however God will bring that about for humanity, we will not yet feel all of God's presence, we will not yet be drawn into the fullness of his sanctifying love. So it was for Mary and Martha; they believed in Jesus, they welcomed back Lazarus when Jesus finally came. But in between it all they had their own tears, and they had Jesus with them in tears, we read, but not yet their Lord in the completeness of his sanctifying love.

But the experience we have of God's presence is what makes us, in this life, into a community into saints—God's presence doesn't make us into a collection of competing spiritual superstars. We are no more perfect than the ancient church in Corinth—but we are all saints as they were. And today five new saints are being made.

I don't mean that I've been on the phone to the Pope this morning to talk about canonization—at least not yet! But I mean that, by baptism, we are setting apart five new saints to be part of one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. So please prepare yourselves to greet St. Aaron and St. Soleil and St. Aidan and St. Annie and St. Thomas. They are joining us on this day, All Saints' Sunday 2006. They are taking their place amongst us and they are looking ahead to the New Jerusalem too.

And after they are welcomed into our company, they will be invited to join all the rest of us around the Lord's Table. They will eat with us in the company of the God we worship for we confess that the bread and the wine are the sign of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ezekiel 37.27*

Christ's body and blood. They are the sign that God dwells with us, that we are set apart, and loved—loved, to bring more saints into our company.