

Solemnity of All Saints, C – November 1, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 5:30pm Vigil & 6:30pm Masses – 715 words

Our first reading on this great Feast of All Saints was from the apocalyptic vision of St. John in the Book of Revelation, in which the saints in heaven are described as “a great multitude, which no one could count”. He beheld them as “wearing white robes”; moreover, they had “survived the time of great distress”, having “washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb”. St. John’s vision teaches us that none of the saints won their prize easily: their sanctification required suffering and distress, being purified and cleansed.

Many think that the times they live in are worse than prior ages. They had it easier; we have it so bad. Of course, if we study a little history or simply reflect a bit more deeply, we know that is not really the case. Nostalgia is a funny thing: it has a way of sifting a certain amount of the bad from our memories and, in a certain way, enhancing the good. Nostalgia can be, in a certain sense, a foretaste of heaven, where all the bad memories and wounds will be redeemed and the good will be magnified. Indeed, only the good will remain.

But even with that foretaste that we might experience even now, we still have to suffer many things; there is still so much distress. We could look about and gripe that somehow our times are worse – but we would do better simply to say that our times are different. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, “It is necessary to suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God”:¹ no one is exempt. And whatever the evils might be, with which we as a society and as individuals must contend, the grace of God is constant in every age.

Yes, the formula for each generation is the same – and it is astonishingly simple. We are to do good and to avoid evil. We are to carry our crosses after Christ. We are, in fact, to imitate him – what the gospel of the Beatitudes is all about; Jesus Christ embodies the Beatitudes in himself. Now, though I said that the recipe for saintliness is simple, that does not mean it is easy. No, we have our particular challenges and, in any case, we always need God’s grace. “Salvation comes from our God...and from the Lamb”, the saints in heaven cried out.

But the great gift that we celebrate today is that it is precisely these saints who not only have left us their instructive examples but also intercede for us even now. They help us also! God’s grace alone is sufficient, but we do not exist in isolation; we are a community of persons, and that community extends well beyond the confines of this world. The saints, in fact, go before us in two senses: they lived before us and have preceded us to heavenly glory – but they also lead us now, through their prayers and example, forward to that great goal.

As we turn to the saints today, we need to ask that they obtain for us their wisdom. Indeed, the wisdom of the saints was such that in every trial and distress they saw Christ and his cross. But how often do we struggle to do so? In every purification they rejoiced to be cleansed by the Lord. But how often do we wish, instead, to hold on to that which is fundamentally impure – not good for us? Oh, but every saint had a past, also. They did not start out perfect. And this gives us hope. If they could do it, so can we!

“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed”. That “shall be” refers both to our future life in this world and the next – and neither has been revealed to us. We know what God desires, though: for us to become holy, like him. That means imitation of Christ by living out the Beatitudes. And it is surely not easy. Let us ask all the saints to obtain for us true wisdom, so that we may fully benefit from all the trials and purifications of this life, that we may rejoice to be with them and with God forever in heaven.

¹ Acts 14:22.