

The Feast of All Saints (and All Souls) 6 November 2022
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Gresham OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan

In the Name of the One, Holy, and Living God.

We began and will end today's service with a hymn that is an all-time favorite for me and countless others. It is a favorite because, like most Ralph Vaughn Williams tunes, it is really fun to sing. It soars in ways that make you really know you're singing, without being difficult. It is also a favorite because of William Walsham How's wonderful text which presents such a stirring vision. It is a very visual poem. Whenever I sing it, I see all those saints.

The hymn begins by thanking Christ for all of the saints who have made their confessions over the centuries, who let the world know about this wonderful life with God made possible in Christ. Then a whole range of different experiences of the faithful are summed up in a few brief lines:

*Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress and their Might;
thou, Lord, their Captain in the well fought fight;
thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light.*

A rock to stand on, a fortress for protection, might for struggle, a captain for battle, light in any darkness – Christ was and is all these for the faithful in all times and places. That verse alone calls up all sorts of specific holy people, probably a different list of names for each of us, our own gallery of saints.

Then we pray that we might be like all of those people from former times that we just called to mind, similarly brave and strong and faithful. And we go on to visualize all of us together, the glorious ones who have gone before and our own less glorious selves.

*O blest communion, fellowship divine!
we feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
yet all are one in thee, for all are thine*

All one communion, all one fellowship. We are all saints, not because we are possessed of special power or virtue, but because we all belong to Christ and to one another. I can see it, all of us together rejoicing, singing all of those alleluias. We stopped there to begin the service, all one together with those who have gone before, worshiping and remembering.

The hymn goes on, as we will sing at the end, to acknowledge that this life of faithfulness to which we are called is not always easy. Sometimes it is very hard and we get weary, but then that 'distant triumph song' 'steals on our ears'. It sneaks up on us and makes us strong and brave again. Can't you feel your back straighten, your brow clear whenever you sing those words?

And then comes that lovely gentle picture of peace and repose:

*The golden evening brightens in the west;
soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;
sweet is the calm of paradise the blessed.*

The picture is vivid but calm, but it is not left that way. Look! Over there!

*But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
the saints triumphant rise in bright array;
the King of glory passes on his way.*

This is no vapid, tepid vision of a boring pastel Heaven. This is a bright, colorful, joyful procession with Christ himself, the King of Glory, the brightest and most exciting one of all. And it is a gigantic procession, from all the corners of the earth.

*From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*

Can you see them? I can – and I can hear them, singing in every possible harmony, filling the universe with joy.

This is a critical aspect of All Saints celebrations – this inspiration provided to us by all of the legions of faithful people who have lived the life of faith, have walked this same pilgrim road before us, and continue to invite us to join them in the battle, in the struggle, in the search, and in the celebration.

We have been offered a vision of life lived with God. Another key aspect is inviting others to join us. With such a fabulous opportunity, to be part of something so beautiful, it would be stingy of us to keep it for ourselves, to fail to go out and invite others in. And so this is one of the four days our church officially recommends for baptism, for including new people into our pilgrim band, into our segment of the Communion of Saints, the joyful company of all faithful people.

And traditionally, whether or not we have people to be baptized today, as part of our All Saints celebration we remind ourselves of what it is to be part of Christ's faithful band. We remember our promises in the Baptismal Covenant: we renew our promises to continue faithfully in worship and prayer and study and fellowship, promises to resist evil and to always seek forgiveness, promises to be living signs of Christ's love and mercy in the world,

On All Saints we consciously reconsider what it is to be part of the Communion of Saints.

I do not believe that I am called to be a saint. I believe that WE are called to be saints, together. We are not called to be holy individuals competing with one another to be the holiest. We are called into community, whether we like it or not, however much we may enjoy and prefer our comfortable self-sufficiency. We are called to be a people, a pilgrim band, together in our cares and in our losses and in our fears, as well as in our joys and in our celebrations. We are particularly called to be a servant people, together serving the world in Christ's name, together noticing what needs to be done, who needs caring for, how to do our part is living God's love for the world.

These are important and key ideas to hold before ourselves in this time of transition in the life of Saint Aidan's, when we will be exploring what path God is laying before us and how we might best respond.

I love the fact that we immediately follow All Saints, the feast recalling inspiring heroes of the faith, with the feast of All Souls, thereby including every person of faith who has ever lived and died in relationship with God. There is room for all of us, however humble, however remarkable.

The feasts are all about inclusion, about being on this journey together. We are not alone. Long ago I was told by a friend who is emphatically not a person of faith that I could never be lonely, because, unlike him, I have God. I was really annoyed at that denial of my experience based on someone else's perceptions of my experience. I was missing my grandmother who had just died and I knew I would never share all our treasured traditions with her again. I was lonely. And truly it was not my relationship with God that sustained me, but much more this great vision of the Communion of Saints, the 'blessed company of all faithful people'. My Grandmama had been a light of my life, and she continues to be because I can feel that connection within this grand community. This family, this faithful band of loving people. We are one, and those bonds are not broken by death. On All Saints we are reminded that our family includes Mother Teresa and Saint Francis and Saint Aidan, that they are not only examples for us, not only inspiring stories, they live with us still. Then on All Souls we are reminded that all those we have loved and lost in our own personal lives are still with us in this one communion and fellowship. We are not alone and I am so grateful.

It is wonderful as Saint Aidan's looks forward, listening for God's call in this time and place, to know we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, people who have inspired each of us in our lives, people who have been part of this community over the years, great inspiring heroes of the faith and unsung, unrecognized faithful people. We are all connected and they will help us to see the way forward, to discover the path laid out before us. They are cheering us on.

I have a lifelong passion for stories of the saints, have even created a book of reflections on the saints that were officially in our church calendar as of 2012, as well as a lifelong passion for poetry and prayer created by thoughtful people that help me find my way along the pilgrim path.

I have put together a handout with a few reflections I encountered and found inspiring this week and I will conclude with the shortest, daily words I heard from a priest in a video about Lindisfarne where Saint Aidan famously lived and served. I think it is a good one to bear in mind in this time of transition: "Though the sun rise cheerless on this isle today I walk in a path of light. I know my greatness. I can't for a moment fall out of the everlasting arms. I'm in the heart of God and I'm on my way to glory."

I believe this for each of us and for the community that is Saint Aidan's. Amen.

The Noise of Politics by Walter Brueggemann

We watch as the jets fly in
with the power people and
the money people,
the suits, the budgets, the billions.

We wonder about monetary policy
because we are among the haves,
and about generosity
because we care about the have-nots.

By slower modes we notice
Lazarus and the poor arriving from Africa,
and the beggars from Central Europe, and
the throng of environmentalists
with their vision of butterflies and oil
of flowers and tanks
of growing things and killing fields.

We wonder about peace and war,
about ecology and development,
about hope and entitlement.

We listen beyond jeering protesters and
soaring jets and
faintly we hear the mumbling of the crucified one,
something about
feeding the hungry
and giving drink to the thirsty,
about clothing the naked,
and noticing the prisoners,
more about the least and about holiness among
them.

We are moved by the mumbles of the gospel,
even while we are tenured in our privilege.

We are half ready to join the choir of hope,
half afraid things might change,
and in a third half of our faith turning to you,
and your outpouring love
that works justice and
that binds us each and all to one another.

So we pray amidst jeering protesters
and soaring jets.
Come by here and make new,
even at some risk to our entitlements.

Taken from *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of
Puritan Prayers & Devotions*, edited by Arthur
Bennett.

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see Thee in the
heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold Thy glory.
Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the
way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.
Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest
wells,
and the deeper the wells the brighter Thy stars
shine;
let me find Thy light in my darkness,
Thy life in my death,
Thy joy in my sorrow,
Thy grace in my sin,
Thy riches in my poverty,
Thy glory in my valley.

(Courtesy Journey with Jesus)

From Father Malcolm Guite: As we come towards Hallowe'en, it's worth remembering that the word Hallowe'en itself simply means 'the eve of all Hallows', and All Hallows is the Christian feast of All Saints, or All Saints Day', a day when we think particularly of those souls in bliss who, even in this life, kindled a light for us, or to speak more exactly, reflected for us and to us, the already-kindled light of Christ!, It is followed immediately on November 2nd by All Souls Day. the day we remember all the souls who have gone before us into the light of Heaven. It is good that we should have a season of the year for remembrance and a time when we feel that the veil between time and eternity is thin and we can sense that greater and wider communion of saints to which we belong. It is also good and right that the Church settled this feast on a time in the turning of the year when the pre-Christian Celtic religions were accustomed to think of and make offerings for the dead. But it was right that, though they kept the day, they changed the custom. The greatest and only offering, to redeem both the living and the dead, has been made by Christ and if we want to celebrate our loving connections we need only now make gifts to the living, as we do in offering sweets to the 'trick or treaters' in this season, and far more profoundly in exchanging gifts at Christmas. Anyway, given that both these seasons of hospitality and exchange have been so wrenched from their first purpose in order to sell tinsel and sweeties, I thought I might redress the balance a little and reclaim this season with a sonnet for All Souls/All Saints that remembers the light that shines in darkness, who first kindled it, and how we can all reflect it.

Though Satan breaks our dark glass into shards
Each shard still shines with Christ's reflected light,
It glances from the eyes, kindles the words
Of all his unknown saints. The dark is bright
With quiet lives and steady lights undimmed,
The witness of the ones we shunned and shamed.
Plain in our sight and far beyond our seeing
He weaves them with us in the web of being
They stand beside us even as we grieve,
The lone and left behind whom no one claimed,
Unnumbered multitudes, he lifts above
The shadow of the gibbet and the grave,
To triumph where all saints are known and named;
The gathered glories of His wounded love.

A Prayer from the Holy Isle of Lindisfarne:

Though the sun rise cheerless on this isle today I walk in a path of light. I know my greatness. I can't for a moment fall out of the everlasting arms. I'm in the heart of God and I'm on my way to glory.