

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Nov 1st 2014

All Saints is a many layered feast. It began in the early church to celebrate the many martyrs whose names had not been recorded and hence could not be individually commemorated. They were, after all, our role models. They had triumphed. They were the ones who, in the words of the first reading, had “washed their robes in the blood of the lamb”. We were to take encouragement from them. The author of the letter to the Hebrews has a wonderful image on that point. After reminding his audience of the exploits of the Old Testament prophets, judges, and kings, he refers to them as a “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) gathered along the course of a race, and cheering the contemporary runners on to victory. The image came straight out of the Greek games, in which the winners in prior years cheer the current crop of athletes on to even better performance. That’s a part of what we mean by the “communion of saints”, which we confess we believe when we recite the Apostles’ creed. We need to take comfort in the fact that those holy ones who have gone before us still care and want us to follow in their footsteps.

At another level entirely, it is both encouraging and frightening to realize that we – all of us – are Saints, Saints already. That’s not because our behavior is all that exemplary or holy, but because the Spirit of Jesus dwells in us through our baptisms. It is precisely through baptism that, as the second reading tells us, we can “be called children of God”. That’s not just a pretty figure of speech. St. Paul refers to the members of his unruly communities as “Saints”, even in letters in which he is scolding them for their gluttony, self-centeredness, and immorality. He urges them, over and over, in one way or another, to “be what you are”. Clearly, if he were writing to us, he would say exactly the same thing. Holiness, we seem to have learned, is something we achieve. It’s disturbing to confront ourselves as holy not because of our merit, but because of what we have been given.

Finally, it’s important today to celebrate the saints among us. Many of the readers of these reflections will be familiar with a monthly publication of the Liturgical Press, “Give us this day”. Immediately following Morning Prayer there is, for every weekday, a single page entitled “Blessed Among Us”, in which are set forth thumbnail sketches of truly blessed individuals, some of them formally canonized, most not, and some few, not even Catholic. How many others may there be, living, working beside us every day? What is it they had in common? They’re not plaster saints, which perhaps we unconsciously expect. They are individuals who are both self-effacing and passionate. They exemplify Paul’s exhortation to his Philippian converts, “. . . looking to others’ interests rather than his own” (Phil 2:4), not out of a false sense of humility, but because they see in others the goodness – that “child of Godness” –which God sees. That goodness trumps every other consideration. And they let no human expectation stop them from making God’s love present, just as did the woman whose tears washed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:38). Perhaps, if we know such persons, we think of them as eccentric, because they break the cultural norms that both constrain our freedom and give us our security. But the blessed among us know that real security comes only from God, not from culturally accepted behavioral conformity. They challenge us if we notice them at all.

Every day, but today at least on All Saints, we should celebrate these “Blessed among us”.

