

All Saints

RCL Rev 7.2-4, 9-17

4 November 2001 St Andrews Fullerton

6 November 2011 St Michaels Studio City

All Saints

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the gold door.”

Twenty summers ago I stood on the island that holds the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor and read these words familiar from school textbooks, part of our cultural background that helps to make us Americans. I was on vacation and doing the tourist thing, seeing all the sights one ought to see. I knew in a general way what to expect, but I was unprepared for the emotional impact, for how moved I was by the simple words and the giant colossus they inscribed. We are all immigrants, taken from another land by circumstance of chance or purpose. All of us, at least metaphorically, have sailed under the gaze and welcoming arms of the lady of the statue.

Then I took the ferry and went to Ellis Island, that port of entry for millions of immigrants for decades until 1954. I walked through the rooms that my great great grandfathers and mothers walked through. Exhibits showed the process: the medical exams which might deny one entrance to the promised land, the interviews, the checking, all necessary, I suppose, and yet demeaning as well. I could still feel the tension and fear in the air.

My Welsh forbears came through this place, apprehensive, no doubt, scared, yet hopeful and full of life and possibility. Our family has lost the particulars; we don't know where they came from in Wales, nor what they did. But we were not born into the aristocracy, so we must have been coal miners, or slate miners, or small farmers—not very special. My father's people settled in the hills of North Carolina and became sharecroppers. My mother's people settled in Georgia and became small farmers and businesspeople. Their story is not different from millions of others.

But they were transformed by the lady of the statue. They were set free from the tyranny of the class system in Wales and England that would have forever held them in bondage to their low birth. My father's and mother's generation went to school; my father was the first in his family and in the mountain hollow they lived in to go to college. His children are the first college graduates in the family and the first to hold graduate degrees.

In this new land they were released from the old limitations and bonded into a new people out to do a new thing in the world, to be a people free and powerful and open and compassionate—and all the other things our national ideals instill in us. In the old country they would never have been allowed; in the new country, they belong, they have dignity, they have responsibility; their children will be better off than themselves. This new people, from east and west and north and south, from every language, people, tribe, and nation, is a new reality on the earth and it is too early to tell the consequence of what has been wrought.

These thoughts of my vacation experience came to me as I was preparing for today, this All Saints Sunday. All Saints is the celebration of God's final purpose for us, His human children. It is the understanding that all will be saints, the high and the low, the famous and the obscure, the obedient and the indifferent. No matter what our beginnings, no matter what life circumstances, God has called us to Himself and God will not be satisfied until we have all sailed into the harbor of the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, the new Jerusalem, where all belong, where all are regarded well, where all are holy, where all are saints. It is not an easy journey; it is filled with pain and anxiety, as well as joy and happiness.

Called from our humble beginnings, this great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, passes not before a majestic lady statue, but before a cross with a great sacrifice of love and obedience hanging on it, life given up for life. Lady Liberty *symbolizes* the freedom of a new land and a new life; God in His Christ actually *causes* a new way, a new life, a new truth, by the power of His good will towards us. Whether we honor a cross with his agonized Body on it, a sign of the costliness of the new way, or an empty cross, the sign of the victory of that sacrifice, it comes to the same thing. We are set free from our old limits to become a new people, the saints of God. In our old way of living, we would not have been allowed to become any of this. But we have been freed in this new land of grace from the old restrictions, and we are building in ourselves and among ourselves the new land, the new Jerusalem, the communion of all God's saints.

The way we go about building this new land is strange and wondrous. It is not a way that we would ever have guessed for ourselves, and we can credit it only because God Himself in Jesus has told us the way. It is a way of getting by giving, of living by dying, of enrichment by sacrifice, of peace through forgiveness, of empowerment through faith, of salvation by trust. It is a way of being rich by being poor, of being comforted by our mourning, of inheriting the riches of the earth through the gentleness of our spirit, of being right by being merciful, of being childlike peacemakers and therefore inheritors of all that God possesses, of accepting persecution and reviling and evil in order to draw those awful things out of our world and bring the balm of healing in their stead. This is our work, God's work, God's all-creating Word. It is the work of prophets and martyrs, of popes and paupers, of mothers and makers, of fathers and families, of singles and servants. It is a strange and wondrous work, this labor of all the saints.

In our work, some of us have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise, names like St. Mary, St. Francis, St. Clare, St. Joseph, even perhaps modern saints like Mother Theresa. But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have

become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly people, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten. These are people like my saintly grandmothers, and probably yours. They are not famous, but they are precious, to us and to our God, for they loved surpassingly and gave us themselves without stinting. Jesus' loving sacrifice is replayed in them, and we are comforted and strengthened and saved by that love and those sacrifices. These are the little ones in the way of the world, but they are great in the kingdom of heaven. They have come through the great ordeal of life, their lives are clean and white, washed by the love and grace of God, they rejoice in the throne room of God, and the one who is seated on the throne shelters them. The One who is gentle as a Lamb, at the center of the throne, is their shepherd, and He gives them the water of life. They weep no more, for their calling now is to dance and laugh and sing. They also wait longingly for us to join them, these saints of God, all re-made in the better mold of God-in-Christ.

While others have gone before us and strengthened with their love and life the communion of God's saints, we are still building, you and I. In our life, we are walking the way of truth that is God with us. Jesus, in one of His teachings, said that *He* was the ultimate Way and Truth and Life, and so we are walking the way of Jesus, living the life of Jesus, holding fast to the truth of Jesus. Such is the work of saints in our world.

Let me then close these reflections with words from one of the greatest poets in the English language, who just happens also to be a Welshman. He was born to the aristocracy, and so did not dig coal or slate or potatoes for a living. He was instead a priest of the church in seventeenth century England, a priest and poet of great insight and love, who died much too early. His name is George Herbert. He wrote a short poem entitled *The Call*, which has been set to music in our hymnal. It is a little mysterious and confusing, but thought-provoking. It is a good description of our call to be God's saints in the world. The poet is addressing the Lord Christ. It reads like this:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends in strife:
And such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
Such a Light, as shows a feast:
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joys in love.