

A Sermon by Fr. Davenport, November 2, 2008

## All Saints' Sunday

Revelation 7:9-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are in the midst of a few action packed days. Yesterday was All Saints' Day. Today, the first Sunday after All Saints' Day, is All Saints' Sunday. Normally, November 2<sup>nd</sup> is All Souls' Day, but we never celebrate All Souls', when we commemorate the dead, on a Sunday, a day to focus on the resurrection. So when November 2<sup>nd</sup> falls on a Sunday, we transfer All Souls' to the following Monday. Tomorrow we will have a terrific high mass of requiem in the evening with St. Paul's Parish. And then Tuesday is Election Day.

All Souls' and Election Day frequently seem to be associated, especially in some regions of the country where the dead have been known to rise up and vote. We may also notice that in 2004 Election Day fell on All Souls', and then this year it's the day before All Souls'. I can't prevent myself from trying to find some divine comment there. But that association is not ultimately what I believe. Even if we often conduct our politics in a grim, dark way, politics is important. It is about people working together and making decisions together and overcoming differences to enhance our lives and our community. Healthy, dynamic, creative civilizations embrace and value political life.

Healthy, dynamic, creative civilizations also take a full frontal look at death. Thomas Lynch is a funeral director in Michigan, and he had a terrific op-ed piece in yesterday's *New York Times*. He noticed that our culture has

quietly turned the family 'parlor' into the 'living room,' the 'burial policy' into 'life insurance' and the funeral into a 'celebration of life,' often notable for the absence of a corpse, and the subtle enforcement of an emotional code that approves of the good laugh but not the good cry.<sup>1</sup>

Our culture doesn't recognize that death is a part of life, and death hurts, death frightens, death humbles, but death is not the end. We diminish our humanity if we try to avoid death, if we try to ignore death. Lynch observes:

The dead get buried but we seldom see a grave. Or they are burned, but few folks ever see the fire. Photographs of coffins returned from wars are forbidden, and news coverage of soldiers' burials is discouraged. Where sex was once private and funerals were public, now sex is everywhere and the dead go to their graves often as not without witness or ritual.

Not here – and especially on All Souls’ Day. Tomorrow evening we’ll have a wonderful high mass to remember our dead. We engage with the sorrow of death, and we pray for the dead, praying that they may behold God face to face and enjoy his presence eternally.

I tend to be a Universalist, that is I expect, and certainly hope, that everyone – no matter their religion, not matter what they’ve done or not done – will ultimately be reconciled to God and rejoice in him eternally. But All Souls’ is good for me because it reminds me that I can’t presume upon God; that entrance into eternity is his decision, his gift; that my departed loved ones may not yet be with God; that my prayer expresses my love and gratitude for them.

Still my desire and instinct is to regard those who have died, especially loved ones, especially people of this parish – in recent months Karen, Jim, Trux, Mort, William – to regard them all as saints, as frolicking now in presence of God. While that’s not wholly kosher, the Church gives us All Saints’ Day to rejoice with all the saints, those known and those unknown. I tend to think of my loved ones as the so-called ‘unknown’ saints.

When I think of the known saints, those Christian heroes who the Church believes are already with God, I’m struck by the diversity of characters: those who I find enormously attractive – John of Damascus, Benedict, Clement of Alexandria; those about whom I have mixed feelings – Francis of Assisi and Thomas a Becket; and those who make me blanch – Bernard of Clairvaux, Cyril of Alexandria. We need them all, those who validate our beliefs and feelings and those who challenge them. We can bet that the unknown saints constitute an even more colorful, more diverse group than the official ones.

I think that the variation of belief and personality has been one of the great virtues of this parish for me. I think of it especially around election time. This community, more than any other I’ve been part of, has shown me the value of differences. I know that there are those who say, “You can’t be Republican and be a Christian.” And, I know that there are those who say, “You can’t be a Democrat and be a Christian.” I say to both of those, “You need to come to this parish.” Our differences can broaden our perspective, deepen our humanity, intensify our empathy. The love of Jesus is greater than death, and so it’s far stronger than anything that divides people. The challenge is to be able to love and to allow for differences.

Almost a hundred years before Columbus, Zheng He, a Chinese admiral, began a series of expeditions at least as ambitious.<sup>2</sup> Columbus’ sailed with 150 men and four ships; the largest, *Santa Maria*, was about a hundred feet long. Zheng’s fleet consisted of 28,000 men and 317 ships, the smallest of which was twice the size of the *Santa Maria*. The largest ships, the ‘treasure ships,’ were 400 feet long and had nine masts. Each treasure ship required three hundred acres of forest to be cut to provide the wood to build it. Zheng sailed from the Yangtze River throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, covering many more miles than Columbus.

Zheng’s expeditions came to a sudden end in the 1430s. A new emperor came to power, and he didn’t favor such trade and exploration. Some officials objected and attempted to keep a

dynamic navy, but they failed. China turned inward. Within a century, the imperial court ordered the destruction of any ocean-going vessel and the imprisonment of its owners.

Part of what strikes me about this story is the relative lack of dissent, and the ineffectiveness of the dissent that there was. It was the emperor's way or the highway. China had highly centralized authority, which allowed it to undertake projects of a mind-boggling scope, but also minimized dissent and differing voices. Columbus, on the other hand, when he couldn't get ships from his native Genoa, or from Venice, or from Portugal, went to Spain and got them.

In a command system, where one person or a few people have a lot of control, there's little capacity for dissent, few voices raising questions; conflict is repressed. In a system where authority is more dispersed, there's more dissent and conflict; it is messier – more confusing, more stressful, more risky, but the outcome often is more learning, more innovation, more discovery, more resilience.

Where conflict is allowed to be expressed, however, there's more open hostility. Conflict strains relationships. It can divide people, or it can strengthen and deepen relationships. Are we brave enough, tough enough, to be peacemakers, to seek reconciliation? Can we keep our own point of view and reach out to those with whom we differ?

In the movie *Gandhi*, there's a scene with Gandhi and the Rev. Charles Andrews, an Anglican priest, who moved to India to work for just treatment of Indians by the British authorities.<sup>3</sup> In the film, Gandhi explained his approach to reconciliation to Andrews while walking through a South African city. When some young thugs appear on the road in front of them and block their way, Andrews wants to hightail it out of there, but Gandhi stops him, asking "Doesn't the New Testament say, 'If your enemy strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left?'" As the youths approach closer, Andrews insists that the saying is metaphorical. Andrews wants to avoid the conflict. Gandhi replies,

I'm not so certain. I have thought about it a great deal. I suspect he meant you must show courage – be willing to take a blow – several blows – to show you will not strike back – nor will you be turned aside... [Then one of the youths flicks his cigarette at Gandhi. Gandhi pauses, and continues] And when you do that it calls upon something in human nature – something that makes his hate for you diminish and his respect increase. I think Christ grasped that and I – I have seen it work.

In a society or culture that values differences – be it United States or the Communion of Saints, it is essential to value reconciliation and peacemaking. Jesus calls each of us to this work. The hard part, the unjust part, of reconciliation is that often the victim may have to take a big risk and do much of the work.

There can be peace despite big differences. That reverses our expectations. But isn't reversal one of the dominant themes of scripture, of the gospels, of the Beatitudes? The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted – all those who seem to have little in this

life are enormously blessed in the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God, and in this world the Kingdom is beginning to take shape, and as the Kingdom takes shape those who despair have hope, those who are ill and disabled receive healing, those who are discouraged are encouraged, those who are down are lifted up, those who are unloved are loved.

Jesus promised that God would shake up the status quo. The Beatitudes promised that those on the bottom wouldn't remain on the bottom. It's a good message, and good news, for us to remember at every election with all of its ups and downs, winners and losers, heroes and goats. In this world victory, like defeat, is temporary, fleeting.

The good news is that something greater is here than the winning and losing of this world. What really matters is our relationships – our relationships with God and with one another – because the Christian hope is that our relationships are eternal, because in the end the dead will rise. We have the tears and the sorrow of All Souls now, but ultimately it'll be the laughter and joy of All Saints.

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Thomas Lynch, 'A Date with the Departed,' *The New York Times*, November 1, 2008.
2. Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, W. W. Norton & Co. (2008), pp. 49-52.
3. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Zondervan (1995), p. 121.