

All Saints

Ephesians 1.11-23

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

Today we commemorate All Saints. Some people think it is only a Roman Catholic habit to love the saints, but really it was the apostle Paul who already wrote about.

He praised the believers in Ephesus that they loved all saints.

1. All saints

For the apostle Paul, believing in our Lord Jesus Christ and loving the saints, were two sides of the same coin. He writes to the Ephesians that he ‘heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus, and their love towards all saints’ (vs. 15)

The two things which must characterize any true Church are loyalty to Christ and love for the saints.

The saints? Let me be clear from the outset. If you want to know what Paul meant with ‘the saints’, see the opening of his letter. ‘Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ [...], to the saints who are in Ephesus.’ The saints are all the living believers in the church.

Six times in this letter Paul addresses the believers in Ephesus as saints; and if you read the letter, it is clear that they are on earth, and they are definitely not perfect yet.

But they are saints, holy, because they are part of the body of Jesus Christ and Christ is perfect and holy.

However orthodox a Church is, however pure its theology, and however noble its worship and its liturgy, it is not a true Church unless it is characterized by love for the others in the pew.



Faith makes us discover that every baptized person is a son or daughter of God, and therefore the Christians' fraternal love is a logical consequence of this insight. We belong together; we belong to God; we love one another. We love all the saints. We are family, after all!

Paul writes in Ephesians 2.19 specifically to the non-Jewish believers in Jesus, you and me, that ‘You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.’

That means, you are saints, you are members of the household of God. And God does not discriminate. He does not look whether you are from Brazil, or Israel, or England.

He does not make distinction between men and women. He does not look at your bank account or your job.

2. An inheritance

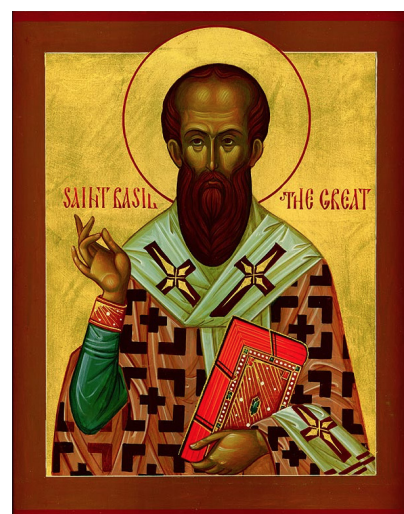
We are one family, and as family members, Paul writes, we also share the same inheritance from God our Father.

You better learn to love all saints, because you are stuck! We all inherit the same inheritance, so we belong together eternally.

St Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, now Turkey, commented on this inheritance:

Paradise is restored to us; we are enabled to ascend to the kingdom of heaven; we are given back our adoption as sons, our confidence to call God himself our Father; we become partakers of Christ's grace, and are called children of light; we are enabled to share in the glory of heaven, to be enveloped in a fullness of blessings both in this world and in the world to come [...].

If this is the promise, what will the final outcome not be? If this, the beginning, is so wonderful, what will the final consummation not be? (De Spiritu Sancto, 15, 36).



The highest experience of Christian love, peace and joy which we sometimes enjoy in this world is only a small foretaste of the love, peace and joy into which we will one day enter.

It is as if God had given us enough to whet our appetites for more and enough to make us certain that some day he will give us all.

What we already experience - the foretaste of what is to come - is the work of the Spirit of God in your life. Paul says that you were actually 'sealed' with the Holy spirit. His stamp has been put on your life.

This seal is about ownership. You belong to God, be sure of it, because the Spirit is at work in your life.

Paul calls the presence of the Spirit in your life the 'guarantee' of your inheritance. The Greek word for this guarantee is arraboon. The arraboon was a regular feature of the Greek business world in Paul's days/

It was the advance payment if you were buying something. There are many Greek commercial documents still extant in which the word occurs.

A woman sells a cow and receives so many drachmae as arraboon. Some dancing girls are hired for a public entertainment and are paid so much in advance.

What Paul is saying is that the experience of the Holy Spirit which we have in this world is a foretaste of the blessedness of heaven; and it is the advance payment by God to you, to guarantee that some day you will enter into full possession of being in the presence of God as his beloved family.

Your future is guaranteed, if you believe in Jesus Christ and if you have been baptised. Put your faith in Jesus Christ, love one another - remember, these are the two sides of the same coin - and you can be sure that your life is safe in the hands of God. Forever.

3. Jesus our guarantee

Paul prays that as the Ephesians have this Spirit of God in their life, that this Spirit will give them wisdom and knowledge of God. One deep insight we all need is knowledge and certainty of this great inheritance.

But Paul also specifically mentions his desire that the believers will see the great power of God at work in us today.

And this power, Paul says, is similar to the power that God worked in Christ when he rose him from the dead and seated him at God's right hand in heaven.

That is a lot of power. At work in us? How come? Look at our daily life. Power? Weakness and problems everywhere!

The fact that God's power is at work in us does not mean that we encounter no difficulties. The Christian life is in many respects a battle which will last until the day we die; we cannot exclude the possibility that enemies both within and without may attack with violent force.

As if that were not enough, you may at times be assailed by the memory of your own past errors, which may have been very many. I tell you now, in God's name: do not despair.



The Lord, for he has chosen you as his child, he will not abandon you, and the Spirit is in your life as the deposit of the eternal inheritance that awaits you.

God allows trials to befall you so as to make you hold on to him, love him the more and discover even more clearly his constant protection and love.

The power of God was revealed in Jesus Christ, and his life was not particularly problem-free. But he is now seated at the right hand of the Father; this means that he shares in God's kingly authority.

Christ's pre-eminence is absolute: he is Lord of all creation, material as well as spiritual, earthly as well as heavenly.

He rules our world, both what is seen and what is unseen, and all things are put under the feet of Jesus Christ. 'Under his feet'. Paul seems to be alluding to Psalm 8:4-6

What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet.

That is a strange Psalm. It seems to speak about us, human beings, but at the same time, a few times in the New Testament, these words are applied to Jesus Christ specifically.

For a short time he was made lower than the heavenly beings, but after his ascension, he was crowned with glory and honor. And, as Paul writes, all things are now put under his feet; he has dominion over all.

This confusion - is it about us, humans, or about Jesus Christ, is intended, I believe.

Paul writes that the one who has all things under his feet, the Almighty Christ, has been given as head over all things to the church. The church, Paul says, is His body.

The church is his body, totally filled with Him. And he fills all in all.

When I think about this, I can hardly speak about this. This is so outrageous.

What a position God has accorded to us, his children. God is your Father. God's Spirit is God's seal of ownership on your life, and this Spirit works powerfully in you.

And Jesus Christ, the Almighty of the universe who has all things under his feet, fills you with his fulness.

Together, we are the body of Christ, and Christ fills us; He works in us.

So under whose feet are all things subjected? His feet? Our feet?

St John Chrysostom, one of the foremost church fathers, made an interesting statement. He said:

It is an awesome fact that the whole power of creation will bow before a man, in whom is the divine word.

It seems Chrysostom also saw this dual reality before him. Those who belong to Jesus Christ together form his body. What he is, we are. Or should we say, we shall be.

For a short time, presently, we are lower than the angels, but the full revelation of what the church of Christ truly is of who we truly are, is coming.

Once more St John Chrysostom:

Oh how high he has raised the church! [...] he has led it up to a great height and installed it on that throne. For where the head is, there is the body also. (Homily on Ephesians 3.i.20-23)

We have a great inheritance waiting for us, when all this becomes reality. And for those who have passed away, it is already reality. Your friends, your family who passed away are with Christ in the throne of the universe.

If they were part of the Body of Christ on earth, what do you think happened when they passed away to be with the Lord? Were they then no longer part of the Body of Christ?

No ofcourse. They are still part of who we are. They are still children of the Father, still sealed with His Spirit, still part of the Body of Christ.

Death is painful. Losing family and friends is deeply hurting. But as believers who are eternally connected with Jesus, we have great comfort. Those who went before us, are presently with Him, connected to him, and thereby they are also connected to us. We are one body of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

When you take Holy Eucharist today, take your time to thank God. He is your Father. Thank the Spirit - He is God's stamp of ownership on your life.

And thank Jesus Christ. He makes us one, in his church, in his body, and that unity is not broken, even when people get their promotion to glory.

So thank God, Father, Son and Spirit for your friends and family who passed away. As we celebrate at the Lord's table, they do so at the same time.

And if you miss them badly, be assured that when today you take bread and wine, they are ever so close to you. We are one body, one people of God, and we are all safe in his hands.

Amen.