

## The Saints?

Today's Sermon is a banquet of stories...so let's dig in...

We hear first from Isaiah, the story of the heavenly banquet and the promise of God's salvation. This is a story that is commonly used at funerals, and is especially poignant for families whose matriarch or patriarch has just died. There will not be a gathering in person like the last Thanksgiving or Easter, or Christmas, or birthday.

How many of us have memories of the holiday table loaded down with turkey, potatoes, special dishes that were made just for that occasion...borrowed folding tables, borrowed folding chairs to fit everyone around it and through the cacophony of sound, people talking over each other, debating who's turn it was to say grace, there was that collection of disparate people, the collection of family.

When the matriarch or patriarch dies there is a fear that things will never be as they once were. And that feeling is absolutely correct. It will never again be as it once was, and yet we can still gather to partake in the rituals that are comforting and joy-filled. And those rituals that were simply tolerated for Nana or Papa's sake can be left to go by the wayside, as new rituals take their place.

The second reading, Psalm 24 talks about the entrance to the temple. A holy and sacred place, generally reserved for the holiest. God is opening the door to the temple and inviting those who are chosen to come in.

The epistle is from the Revelation to John. For four days, while at Clergy Study Conference, we read from and engaged the apocalyptic writing of the Revelation. Our keynote speaker, the Reverend Canon Herbert O'Driscoll spoke eloquently and authentically about the apocalyptic changes happening in the world and how we must turn our full attention to face them. Changes such as the climate crisis, racism, especially with our First Peoples, the changes in the current Church and the desire to see and do things in a new way.

The old world has passed away in the Revelation to John. We are told that the new earth and the new heaven, the new Jerusalem was before us. There would be no more mourning or hunger or thirst. There would be no more fear or loathing. Instead we would be surrounded with a vision so beautiful it is difficult to imagine. And we are told "I am making all things new." (Revelation 21.5, NRSV)

Finally, we have the gospel of John where part of the story of the raising of Lazarus takes place. Jesus knew his dear friend Lazarus was ill and dying. He could have come and healed him, but instead he knew he had to let Lazarus die. Mary and Martha are heartbroken and when Jesus finally arrives, it feels as though his arrival is too late. Each in turn, he speaks to his beloved friends who tell him if he had been there sooner their brother would not have died.

Yet that wasn't the point of the gospel. The message in the gospel was that Lazarus had to die in order that Jesus could raise him from the dead. Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. The stench is quite strong. But Jesus orders the stone moved and orders Lazarus to come out of the temple. A solemn gathering to be certain. And yet, consider this...Lazarus would be bound in cloth and the cloth would be stuffed with spices and oils to hide the stench. He would be bound up tight. There would be no way for him to casually walk out of the cave. For Lazarus to leave the cave he'd have had to hop, like a bunny. Can you imagine? That would be quite a scene!

Now, some of you may be wondering why there were jokes, and groaners at that, inserted in today's service. Several reasons:

Today is the 5th Sunday, which means we have permission to do things a little differently. Also, these are heavy readings, and could use a little lightening up. And because we've been carrying heavy burdens as we navigate the future of the Church; as a body of people, as a gathering of denominations and as the buildings in which we worship. So, I thought it only appropriate to hit the steam valve and release a little tension.

What does it take to be a saint? For the Church that's a long and complicated question...and it goes something like this...

Step 1 - be dead for five years. This is to give time to assemble a committee to look into the life of the dead one and determine if their life was one which deserves to be beatified. It also gives some time to properly grieve before the icky part of discovery happens.

Step 2 - become a servant of God. If a case is made for a person to be beatified, research is done into their life from the parish in which they died. This can take some time. If there is sufficient evidence, then the Bishop for that area strikes a Congregation for the Causes of Saints Committee.

Step 3 - Show proof of life of "heroic virtue" If evidence is found to support this, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints Committee sends their findings to the Pope. If the Pope agrees, the deceased can then be referred to as "Venerable".

Step 4 - verified miracles. This is a tricky one. Proof needs to be received that a person has prayed to the deceased and a miracle, usually one of healing, has occurred. It is believed if the miracle has occurred the deceased is already in heaven. After beatification, the candidate is given the title "blessed". There is one exception to the miracle requirement - a martyr, someone who died for their faith, can be beatified without a verified miracle.

Step 5 - Canonisation. Canonisation is the final step in declaring a deceased person a saint. To reach this stage, a second miracle generally needs to be attributed to prayers made to the candidate after they have been beatified. Martyrs, however, only need one verified miracle to become a saint.

Now, with all that said, what is one thing that every single saint has in common?

They're all dead.

The formal definition of Saint is one who has been beatified. One who has led a virtuous life. The informal definition of Saint is one who is believed to be a very virtuous, kind or patient person.

Ever heard the phrase, "S/he is a saint for putting up with him/her?" This doesn't mean the person should be referred to as a capital "S" saint, but rather, someone who is believed to possess a virtue beyond the average mortal human being.

There is another official definition within the Church that we often hear. Being among the saints in heaven. This is attributed to anyone who lived a life of faith. Someone who may have lived an ordinary life, but impacted someone in their life or community, that they are now considered saints in heaven. Such as Saint Daniel Bendicson, Saint Edward Chorostecki, Saint Gisela Lutzke , Saint John Cimolini, Saint Joshua Colley, Saint David Barrett, Saint Ron Bath, Saint Jean Moss, Saint Elizabeth Gravelle, and Saint David Fuller.

I am certain you have many other names to add to your own saints list. What this list tells me is that for most ordinary people, in order to be considered a saint, you don't need or want a formal vetting process tied up with rules and regulations. All you need is someone who knows you, loves you and will remember you. Because as long as we are remembered, we live.

I close with a story.

There once was a fire and brimstone preacher who stood up in the pulpit every Sunday and rained down judgment and fear on his congregation. He had opinions on every single issue in the Church and in the community.

This one Sunday he was on his Temperance soapbox. "If someone were to give me every bottle of the finest whiskey, I would go to the river and throw them all in. He went on to decry the methods of fermentation of grain mash. He cursed the farmers who grew barley, corn, rye, and wheat to be used in these fermented grain mashes. He cursed the barrel makers in which the whisky is aged. And he yelled at those who would consume this product to the point of intoxication.

Then turned his attention to beer. "If someone gave me every keg, bottle and can of beer, I would go to the river and throw them all in. He raged against the farmers who grew barley, and hops used in the production of beer. He cursed the bottlers who would ferment and hide their product while it rested. And he yelled at those who would consume this product to the point of intoxication.

Finally, he turned his attention to wine. Now, you would think with Jesus drinking wine and even turning water into wine that this pastor would ease up a little on the fruit of the vine. But then you would be incorrect. He bawled at the grape growers and pickers. He cursed the vintners who added the water and yeast to aid in the fermenting process. He raged at those who would put their bottle product away while it aged. And he yelled at those who would consume this product to the point of intoxication.

The organist at this particular parish was away and had asked a friend who was a very talented organist at a nearby parish to fill in for him. He was a clever and quick-witted man who had listened to the pastor's sermon with rapt attention. As the sermon was wrapping up he called over the Choir master and gave him instructions that the closing hymn would be changed.

And so the pastor wrapped up, "And to you, heathens, who are intent on consuming that which the devil has made, I leave you to ponder on that which I have spoken today. If I was given all the whiskey, all the beer, and all of the wine in the world, I would go down to the river and throw it in!  
We will now have our offertory hymn.

He gestured to the organist who instructed the choir to raise their hymnals as together they joined in singing "Shall We Gather at the River".

It is necessary to have a sense of humour in these troubling times. It is imperative to laugh as it helps ease tension and can raise our mood. And so, because it is a lovely finish to this sermon and because it is one of the old chestnuts of the Church, let us sing together, Shall We Gather at the River.

I bet you'll never think of this hymn in the same way again, will you?

Amen.

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31 October 2021  
Sermon for All Saints

Isaiah 25.6-9  
Psalm 24  
Revelation 21.1-6  
John 11.37-40

Lyrics to Shall We Gather at the River

Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod;  
With its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God?

Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

Ere we reach the shining river, Lay we ev'ry burden down;  
Grace our spirits will deliver, and provide a robe and crown.

Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

Soon we'll reach the shining river, soon our pilgrimage will cease;  
Soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace.

Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

Written by Robert Lowry  
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Melody "Hanson Place"