

## **Sermon      All Saints November 1, 2020**

The Christian church since early on has celebrated All Saints' Day on November 1 every year. That has also been our custom here at Christ Lutheran. All Saints is a day when we remember with respect all believers who have gone before us and are with the Lord.

We humans have as part of our nature the need to call to remembrance those who have come before us. One of the most common forms of religion through the ages has been ancestor worship. For people without any other knowledge of God, ancestor worship does make sense. We all have pictures in albums, on our walls and tables and in our phones and computers of loved ones who have since crossed to another shore. Many in our families have traced back into our family trees. Some of you have even had a DNA test to get a glimpse of your ancestry.

You can hardly go through any town without passing some sort of memorial erected to remember and honor those who have served their country in Desert Storm, Vietnam, Korea, WW's I and II, the Civil and even Revolutionary wars. Take a trip to ground zero in New York City and you will find the 9/11 memorial with the names of all the victims of that attack engraved in stone.

We need to remember the dead. It is part of who we are and what makes us humans. Accordingly, the church has long appointed special days to remember important people of its history – St. Valentine, St. Patrick, St. Peter, St. John, Mary, and many others. There came a time when history produced so many people worthy of remembrance that the church had to group them all into one special day of remembrance. That day is today, November 1. Those the church had in mind to be remembered included the countless believers who forfeited their lives rather than their faith in the great persecution of the church, especially in the 4<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. The church needed to mark the deaths of all those who had suffered and died. All Saints' Day was designed to serve that purpose.

History has produced many martyrs for the faith. Along with the Old Testament prophets, the church remembers people like St. Andrew. Andrew was from Bethsaida along the Sea of Galilee and is the patron saint of fishermen. He was Peter's brother and one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. Andrew became a missionary to the peoples on the shores of the Black Sea where Greece and Turkey are found today. The governor of that region told Andrew to stop preaching Christ and to deny his faith. He would not. Andrew was crucified for his faith, requesting an "X" shaped cross instead of one like Jesus', not deeming himself worthy to die on the same style instrument as the Lord.

St. Lawrence, the patron saint of the poor, was ordered to die by the Roman Emperor Valerian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Valerian had already executed the leader of the church in Rome and the other deacons. Lawrence was quickly giving all the money the church had to the poor. Valerian wanted the money for himself. Refusing to hand it over, Lawrence was strapped to an iron grid and roasted to death.

A timely remembrance for us these days is St. Sebastian, the patron saint of plagues. Sebastian was appointed the captain of the praetorian guard of Emperor Diocletian. Sebastian used his connections to convert officials to the faith. When Diocletian learned Sebastian was a Christian and was responsible for these conversions, he had him killed by tying him to a pole and then shot with arrows. This martyrdom was exceptional, as Sebastian was later found to be alive, nursed back to health, and he then again presented himself to the emperor who had him beaten to death with clubs and thrown into the city sewer. This time for good. Countless other believers have been beheaded, cut in half, flayed, eaten by animals, drowned, drawn and quartered, suffered death by a thousand cuts, and more.

The greatest martyr of all, of course, is Jesus Christ. Not only did Jesus endure the blows, flogging, thorns, nails and death by asphyxiation of his physical crucifixion, he also bore the judgement, penalty, and punishment of the sins of all people upon his soul all at once.

What was it that spurred St. Andrew, Sebastian, and the rest of the faithful on to the point of death rather than recant their faith in Jesus? It was the remembrance of how much Jesus had suffered for them. It was the blessed eternal life Jesus gave them in their baptism. It was the knowledge that the greatest reward given above belongs to those who willingly suffer and die for the name of Jesus.

For most of those we remember this All Saints' Day – those of our own - God did not deem it necessary for them to be faithful to the point of facing the edge of a sword, stoning, cross, or firing squad. Yet they did have untold challenges to their faith, nonetheless. They faced rejection, abandonment, doubts, deprivations, enticements, pains and sorrows. Through it all they did remain faithful to the Name and have now gone on to the glory he promises each one of us who hold to the faith in the midst of the adversities of this life.

*Martyr* is the title given to those who were killed because of their faith. In everyday speech, the Greek word *martyr* means *witness*. In dying for their faith, martyred saints gave witness not only to their own faith, but to the extreme value of the belief of all who call upon the name of Jesus to be saved.

And Jesus does indeed call all of us to be martyrs because of our faith. In Luke chapter 9, Jesus teaches,

***For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.***  
***Luke 9:24***

Doesn't it sound like Jesus is calling us to be martyrs/ witnesses? Indeed, he is. However, Jesus does not mean that we should willingly go out and find a way to die for his cause. If we are ever faced with the choice of being killed or denouncing Jesus, we are to stand courageous in what we believe. But the real everyday threat to our life is from our old self and the Tempter. The Holy Spirit has given us a new life that seeks to live in peace, love God with everything we have to give, and to love others as ourselves. That old nature loves itself more than the rest, and

constantly vies for control of our lives. Satan knows this all too well and gives it as much encouragement as he can. We're pretty attached to that old self. Its what we know best. When we give witness to the new faith and life within us by killing the old nature and not giving in to its desires and false beliefs, we show ourselves to be the children of God, the brothers and sisters of Jesus. Then we will be saints on the outside as well as the inside. Then we will shine like the saints of God we are called to be.

God bless us as together we remember with respect and favor those who have gone on to glory. God strengthen us to be faithful unto death and join them there in our heavenly home. Amen.

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