



11/1/2020 Together Before God
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Funeral services are the best places to hear praises of the people who had just died. For some reason, it comes easier to compliment each other when we are dead, and usually, the compliments go one way. That is the time when we hear what a good person the deceased was; how gentle, wise, fun loving and family oriented that person was. People can easily identify and celebrate posthumously those who have demonstrated kindness, wisdom, patience, justice, temperance, and generosity. We know there are no perfect living beings in our midst. Even those who have died were not perfect. Yet, we are generally willing to overlook the negative traits in favor of the more positive ones when talking of dead people. Perhaps, it is our grief that makes us more generous and sensitive towards the dead. Perhaps, we should train ourselves to be just as generous and sensitive towards the living.

What do you want to be remembered by?

What does it mean to live your life fully? Are you going to die a good death? Are you living a good life?

As an epitaph for her headstone, the surviving children agreed on the following: "To our mother: you spent your life expressing animosity for nearly every person you encountered, including your children. Within hours of his death, you have managed to declare your husband of fifty-seven years unsuited to being either a spouse or a father. Hopefully, you are now insulated from all the dissatisfaction you found in human relationships."

On All Saints Sunday we remember those who have died *for* the faith and those who have died *in* the faith. We also recognize this day all the baptized, living and dead. The word "saint" can mean biblical characters, like St. Paul, and the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; it can refer to famous Christians over the centuries, like St. Francis, St. Patrick, St. Lucy, and St. Agnes; and it also can mean every baptized person, those who have already died, those still alive, and those who will come after us.

Following biblical insights, Martin Luther was brutal in his straightforward acknowledgment: We are all sinners. But then, with the same clarity and boldness he was quick to add: We are saints, as well. We are sinners in our own right and saints by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection for us.

The heightened spiritual sensitivity of John of Patmos, the writer of the Book of Revelation, allows him to describe the baptismal robes of those in the new Jerusalem, the celestial cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and now stand in glorious singing before the throne of God. Their robes, he writes, are washed in the blood of Christ.

I can't wait to be surprised to see whom I will find in that crowd. Certainly, I will see all the patriarchs and matriarchs, all the prophets and servants of God. I will see the martyrs who "have come out of the great ordeal" and have persevered in the faith during times of atrocity and abuse: they have their vindication and consolation before God. Their glory and luminosity will be readily visible. I will also see those who have endured a life of hardship, neglect, and tears, and have grieved greatly for the injustices



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and self-indulgencies of the selfish, the powerful, and the untouchables through the centuries up to our times. They are the ones who have transitioned into the joy and peace of God.

But I am convinced I will also find in the crowd those whose heart was known to God alone and from the outside seemed so rough, so unattractive. Their presence will speak of God's redeeming glory capable of purifying hearts and restoring souls. These are the ones who have finally transitioned from a life of disconnect from self, others, and God into the arms of God. They are the ones who have been wondering aimlessly with great unhappiness and dissatisfaction in life. In the presence of God, they are finally being made whole and replenished. Funny how the beatitudes describe what God's grace looks like for humanity. It is a radical departure from the prosperity gospel and cultural assumptions about who God blesses and how those blessings come about. The blessings described in the gospel of Matthew (ch. 5) take place when God's kingdom through Jesus comes near. Blessings like comfort, mercy, abundance, belonging, and divine favor come to those who life humbles, who experience sorrow, and who are merciful to others. There is hope in our saving Lord.

Oddly enough, we will see in that same crowd those we brushed up against, those who annoyed, betrayed, antagonized, and stubbed us in the back during our life on earth. There will also be those we tried to love and didn't succeed, those who tried to love us and couldn't get through, those we judged and were judged by. Our God is a merciful God.

Through the communion of the saints, which we affirm in the Apostles' Creed, we are part of that heavenly choir, too. Not because our voices can carry a tune. No, we have made the cut because of the bath of Baptism through the blood of Jesus. We have a generous and merciful God who will not relent until everybody is included and, as a good choir director, is not satisfied until all of us are made capable of singing the same tune with one voice and one heart in the same mind of Christ.

When we practice the faith on a daily basis, we train our voices, we pay attention to the voice of our heart. With training we are transformed not so much from a lower to a higher realm as from a material to a spiritual realm. With training we renounce the attractive lure of the ways of the world and are renewed in the Spirit of Jesus.

So what's the Christian training about? How do we keep ourselves on the straight and narrow? How do we identify and live the humble, loving, caring, and simple Way of Jesus?

First of all, with a lot of prayer. Temptations to abandon the Way of the Lord and follow the teachings of the world are constantly lurking and pulling us down. We need to pray daily just as we have been commanded by our Lord, and turn to our heavenly Father with all our trust. In every moment of every day we need to ask that God's name be honored in all we do and say, that God's will be done in us and not ours, that God's Kingdom of peace and compassion may come in us. Every day we need to be aware of and present to God our need so we may be strengthened and go about God's way. The future Kingdom of God is already present in our midst if we but are capable of tuning in. We will be able to see



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tomorrow what we work on today. If we want to see a crowd singing the praises of God who fulfils promises of justice and peace, we may want to start today to appreciate and work for justice and peace. If we want to see people of all nations, tongues, and races around the throne of God we may want to be inclusive and work for social and economic equity now.

Secondly, we need to learn to die before we die. That is the only way to have a happy ending. That is the only way to may have a happy life. We need to learn how to count our years and our days. We need to remember that we will not be here forever; that all those who came before us have died and we shall, too; that death comes with being born and is only a passage; that every breath we take, every moment we live we get closer to death. We learn to die before we physically die by learning to let go of our attachments, by living a simple life, by considering that we shall have to leave behind even the people we love. It is a daily training that requires daily help from the Lord.

Dying daily requires letting go of our ego, shedding our attachments to the socially exalted reality “I, me, and mine.” It requires daily humility, a daily choice to let Christ live in me and not I as St. Paul was able to say.¹ So, when a challenging moment comes our way, we may remind ourselves: “Christ, not I.”

May the communion of the saints hold us together in praising our living God. Amen.

¹ Galatians 2:20