

November 4
Ecclesiasticus 44
St Matthew 5: 1 - 12

On the church calendar, as we all know, we observe All Saints' Day on the 1st of November. It is one of many major holy days in Christianity. Another was on Monday the 29th - the feast days of two major saints. These red letter or red number days throughout the year, all of them signifying a major or significant saint, and almost always the men and women most closely associated with the life of Jesus. But the church also recognizes some 35,000 other godly men and women as saints. The most recent to be elevated to this status was Caesar Romero, Bishop of Guatemala, who was murdered by a knifeman while celebrating Holy Communion.

Obviously, there are not enough days on the calendar for all of them, yet they are too important to be ignored, so the first of November is a time of recognizing their contributions to the Church and their example and way of life as an influence on our lives. It is our way of honouring them, and that is important because we are always at our best when we recognize and honour others for their gifts.

The following day, November 2nd, has long been known as All Souls Day, in commemoration of godly men and women of all ages. Like the recognized saints themselves, they are not perfect because perfection, at least in human eyes, is always subjective and usually instantaneous, and even subject to change. Sometimes our thoughts, words, and interpretations are based on so many other things in our life. It could be a lack of sleep, really good or really bad news, or how we are physically feeling. Even then, our idea of saintliness and goodness are often based on our perspectives of what we think is good, bad, or indifferent.

You and I make decisions, but when it comes to judging another person, Jesus says don't do it. Step away from that because that is God's business. He said don't be so critical of other people, pointing out their character flaws because it is like a person with a big log in his eye obsessing over another person with a speck in their eye. Stay away from it because that is God's territory. You just take care of yourselves. St Paul followed that message with the advice to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

We honour the saints and the souls of all the departed this day. We did it with the list of names you gave us. We put the exclamation point on it with the hymn - I Sing a Song of the Saints of God - where we are reminded we meet them everywhere, the affirmation of our desire to be a man or woman of God, too.

Still, we know two certain facts. The mortality rate remains at 100 percent. One of these days our names will be on the list in the bulletin insert. And second, after someone dies, in time most of us will drift into obscurity. Two weeks ago, in our bulletin for our 150th celebration, we reproduced the names of the founding members

of our church. A few names have recognition - Stockbridge, Arnold, and a couple of others. Many of the rest of the men and women, once vital members of our community and this parish, most of them forgotten.

That obscurity is our very likely future, and the time will come when our names are on the All Saints Day Memorial List, and then slide into obscurity. That seems to many to be a very bleak prospect, because none of us wants to be forgotten. In the words of the theme song from the old television series "Cheers" we all want a place where they know our name - whether it is a watering hole in Boston or at least on a list.

But we are not without hope, for time and again, we have God's promise that those who have committed themselves to Him, will have eternal life. They will not be forgotten. Their good deeds, their examples, will live on because if only because they left their small part of the world in a far better place/

But before we get to that day, you and I have our work to do. We find it in our Gospel lesson. Often they are called the Beatitudes, or as sometimes nicknamed, the Blessed R's, at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in St Matthew.

Often, we look at it from a perspective that God and Jesus will proclaim us to blessed people if we work intentionally and intently on them. True enough, but when we look at it from that perspective, it seems to become a bit of a competition or successfully completing an evaluation.

From a different perspective, it means that we are the blessing in the lives of others. Let's follow that through for a couple of the verses.

The first one is blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. A person who is poor in spirit is one who recognizes that the world does not revolve around them, but that all things are subject to the will of God. They have no interest in building a great monument or institute made in their image. They have no need to have the accolades. They know and understand the ideas of self-giving, service to others, love and compassion are far more important than anything else. They are not too proud so submit themselves to Christ. They are not so self-confident that they think they can get along without God's presence and direction in their life. Quietly, and to the best of their ability, they give their time and energy to caring for others. Their presence is a blessing. We are blessed because of them.

The second is blessed are those who mourn, and the promise of comfort. Re-arrange the words and see a different perspective. There are those who mourn - perhaps for a departed loved one, perhaps for changes in their life, perhaps for almost any other reason. You and I are called to be present with others who are in sorrow. When we pause, focus on them, and listen, we are the blessing. We are God's agents here on earth. Go - be the comforter. Listen, let them talk it through.

That's what will be happening in our parish hall tomorrow night when the facilitator from Wings of Hope Hospice leads a grief workshop. People share their thoughts and feelings, sometimes their tears, and their mourning and sorrow, and they comfort one another. But look how it builds on the first Beatitude - no one

compels anyone to come, and it is hard to admit a need for comfort and to humble themselves to come here, rather than just tough it out. The participants become each other's blessing.

Often, it happens here at the Brotherhood of St Andrew meetings because, over the years, we have created a place where men can talk and share openly with each other about their faith, and about what is happening in their life. And it is comforting. It is a blessing.

Go through these verses, pray and meditate over these Beatitudes this next week, and let your imagination soar on how many opportunities there are to be a blessing to other. None of them require a lot of structure or organization. They don't require money.

Jesus didn't just talk a good story. He lived it. He set the example. Our Lord did not build a church; He ushered in the Kingdom of God and demonstrated what it meant to live in the completely unstructured Realm of Humanity. Instead of a great cathedral, He showed us how to build a community of compassion.

Read the Gospels again, and see how He devoted His life to demonstrating love and doing good as He travelled throughout Israel. He spoke about faith in God, and praised those who asked for healing because it already meant that they believed so much in God that they could be healed, they dared to ask.

That drove those in authority half-mad. They were beside themselves. Who gave you the authority to teach this way, to heal these people? What right do you have to say these things? We're in charge, and you are interrupting our plan. How dare you! They threw him out of their synagogues and houses of worship, tried to throw Him off a cliff, harried him out of Bethany after He raised Lazarus from the tomb. They mocked, laughed, belittled Him.

Sometimes He made a strategic withdrawal, but then He came right back again, not to fight but do do what was right, and that was made clear on Easter morning.

Of all of those 35,000 saints we recognize on November 1st, none is more beloved than St Francis of Assisi. One day he knew God was calling him. The message was 'build my church.' He took it literally and found an abandoned, derelict church and started to work. After a while, he realized he had heard the words 'build my church' but God's message didn't include stone and mortar. It was bigger.

Without permission he began imitating Jesus - travelling around his area, spending time with people, being present with them. When the children in a church could not quite comprehend the concept of the story of the birth of Jesus, he carved a nativity set for them, and then they got it.

Soon others were joining up with him, and they became known as the Franciscans. A few years later women became part of this Jesus movement being led by Saint Francis, and became the Poor Clares - the Sisters of St Francis. To this day they continue to devote themselves to nursing, teaching, and caring for people.

St Francis and his companions got it right. Simple, one on one retail Christian compassion. And at the same time, standing opposite him was the most powerful man Europe has ever known, Pope Innocent III. He

ordered three crusades that left well over a million people dead. Kings yielded to him in fear and trembling. He authorized the Children's Crusade. Some 300,000 boys and girls went to the Holy Lands; not one came back. St Francis and the Pope were opposites. The two men met once, and the Pope realized he was in the presence of true, practical practicing Christianity. The most powerful man in the western world, knelt down in front of him and kissed St Francis' sandals.

This is the day to choose whether you want to put the teachings of Jesus into action or not. And tomorrow you'll choose again, and keep choosing every day.

I am increasingly convinced that if Christianity is going to survive in this country, in the world, we need to simplify. It isn't the number of members on a church roll or the budget that matter. It is the conscientious, intentional, persistent choice to embrace the ethics and teachings of Jesus. It's old fashioned, one on one, acts of compassion. We include everyone, not just those with whom we share similar political, religious, economic beliefs. We include everyone who pledges their life to uphold the dignity of every other person. When we do that, we will know we are blessed, because we are the blessing to others.