

Daily Prayer

The Saints of the Old Testament

Wednesday, November 4, 2020

We enter into a time of quiet. We offer to God our selves and in the silence know that God embraces us as God's very own. We offer to God our hopes and our concerns through our prayers and in the silence listen for God. Today we hold in our prayers the ordinary moments in life—the trials and the joys—and the Saints of the Old Testament

We begin by saying

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is God not of the dead, but of the living

Matthew 22.32

The First Reading

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of

witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-12, 23-28, 32-12.3

The Psalm

For the Lord loves justice; *
does not forsake his faithful ones.

They shall be kept safe for ever, *
but the offspring of the wicked shall be destroyed.

The righteous shall possess the land *
and dwell in it for ever.

The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, *
and their tongue speaks what is right.

The law of their God is in their heart, *
and their footsteps shall not falter.

The wicked spy on the righteous *
and seek occasion to kill them.

The Lord will not abandon them to their hand, *
nor let them be found guilty when brought to trial.

Wait upon the Lord and keep his way; *
he will raise you up to possess the land,

and when the wicked are cut off, you will see it.

I have seen the wicked in their arrogance, *
flourishing like a tree in full leaf.

I went by, and behold, they were not there; *
I searched for them, but they could not be found.

Psalm 37.28-36

The Gospel Reading

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.'" Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.'

Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.'

Matthew 22.23-32

We continue with the reflection that follows. In silence, we ask what the reading has to say to us today. Is there something in the reflection that draws us more deeply into the reading? What does God have to say to us? What do we have to ask God?

The Reflection

Nate Wall

Early November is for breaking bread with the dead.

At least, it's been that way for Christians since about the mid-8th-century. By that time the number of saints had piled up. We were running out of Sundays to assign to the memory of a *saint* when we gathered around the Eucharistic table. So Pope Gregory III marked November 1 as a catch-all, expandable feast day, one for *all the saints*.

"Saints" is the Christian word for the departed faithful we remember for "holiness," that is, the strange, godward tilt of their lives. Which is, of course, every Christian in a way, but also isn't every Christian. All stars belong in the sky, but only are worth navigating by. And any housemate of mine will tell you I'm no Saint Francis of Assisi.

That's where "All Souls' Day" comes in. The day after All Saints' Day—November 2—is the day we remember ordinary Christians, now gone from the land of the living. People like my Granny Wall. People you've known, some whom you love still. People like you and me one day.

All Saints and All Souls are past now, but it turns out we're not finished breaking bread with the dead. Today, Wednesday, the fourth of November, is the Church's memorial day dedicated to the Saints of the Old Testament. Few know that. Half the time, I forget. It's a small hill, easily dwarfed by the mountain ranges of Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter. Mostly it's hidden in the shadow of All Saints' Day.

I suppose that's usually where the saints of the Old Testament sit, in our imagination. In the shadows. Most ordinary Christians in our day never linger over the pages of the Old Testament, getting firsthand knowledge of the lives of these Saints. But the neglect goes further.

Go look long and hard; you still won't find churches named after Saint Sarah or Abraham, Saints Moses and Miriam, or Isaiah, or David, or Ruth.

Why is that?

I don't know. My guess is that Israel's ancient Saints feel alien. Most of us are Gentiles, for one. And we are moderns, after all, which means we consider the past not so much behind us as beneath us. These very Jewish strangers lived a very long time long ago; their lives grew in strange soil; their lungs breathed strange air. They prayed, and begged, and berated, and promised in foreign languages very few of us could understand. Frankly, they confess God's *wildness* in ways that often make us squirm.

Yet today our reading from *Hebrews* invites just these ancient Saints out from the shadows. In fact, this sermon from the early Church—we call it *The Letter to the Hebrews*—parades the Saints of the Old Testament before us. There goes improbable mother Sarah, yes, and old Abraham; here comes Moses, hot-tempered and flint-faced; and—wow!—did you see that throng of lesser figures, named and unnamed, whiz past? I only really saw their silhouette—a blurred pattern of unlikely triumphs and untimely ends.

So what's this parade all about, anyhow?

Well, there's no chance you missed the refrain. *By faith* Abraham ... *by faith* Moses. Just to humour me, however, swap the English word "trust" for the word "faith." In *trust*, Abraham left his only home for the Promise of a home and a heritage; by *trust*, Sarah conceived; out of *trust* their impossible kids lived semi-nomadic lives, always passing on a promise, whose fulfillment always lay around the next bend. On *trust*, generations of Old Testament Saints lived toward a Promise, a City where everything good would be at home, a City built by the One who had spoken the Promise that started the whole absurd, beautiful parade of generations.

All by trust.

In a book published earlier this year, called *Breaking Bread with the Dead* the writer Alan Jacobs argues that one of the most important things you and I can do, in this time and place, is befriend the dead—even the long dead, even the strange. He writes:

“There’s an important sense in which we cannot use the past to love ourselves unless we also learn to love our ancestors. We must see them not as others but as neighbors—and then, ultimately, as kin, as members of our (very) extended family” (*Breaking Bread With the Dead*, 150).

What if these long-dead people of trust weren’t strangers? What if they were our neighbours, objects of our love, teachers on our murky, stumbling way?

Maybe the best way to spend some sliver of your November is to befriend one or two ancient Saints. Read the Book of Ruth. perhaps for the first time. Trace the footsteps of Sarah and Abraham again through the Book of Genesis. Count the songs and tears and sins of King David. Meditate on Ruth’s fierce loyalty. Linger over Sarah and Abraham’s surprised laughter. Take to heart David’s full, flawed humanity. See your footsteps overlap theirs.

Because for all their faults, for all their strangeness, we have something in common with them.

The same Voice that won their trust is calling us on too. Not only did that Voice speak a world into being, and reach out to each of these ancients, that Voice became flesh and joined us in the life of Trust. He knew better than anyone that life often leaves us parched, that the City is slow in coming, and the promise hard to hold onto, especially when you’re all by yourself in the morning, or by yourself in a Garden at night.

But there he is, sure enough—at the head of the parade, says Hebrews. And there's Ruth, Abraham, Sarah. Deborah, Haggai, Rahab.

Wilder still: if you trust Hebrews, not to mention what Jesus himself says, then these ancient Saints aren't locked in the past. No, the parade is here, circling you and me, thick like a cloud, as we make our way to our own finish line. A family we've mostly never met face to face, is here cheering us on by name—even now, through this interminable, wearying time of the virus. *Go on, they say. Yes, you can. Just one more step. We're with you all the way. Hold on. Look up.*

And if you focus your eyes straight ahead, you might see the Voice himself, at the head of a crowded table, holding off on supper until you and I get there safely.

When the time is right, we conclude our time of silence with the canticle

The Canticle ~ Song of the Covenant

Thus says God, who created the heavens, ♦
who fashioned the earth and all that dwells in it;
Who gives breath to the people upon it ♦
and spirit to those who walk in it,
'I am the Lord and I have called you in righteousness, ♦
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
'I have given you as a covenant to the people, ♦
a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
'To bring out the captives from the dungeon, ♦
from the prison, those who sit in darkness.
'I am the Lord, that is my name; ♦
my glory I give to no other.'

Isaiah 42.5-8a

We continue in prayer for those people and situations that we hold up before God (The Intercessions) and continue with the concluding collect, the Lord's prayer and the closing sentences.

The Intercessions

Let us pray to the Lord, who is our refuge and stronghold.

For the health and well-being of our nation,
that all who are fearful and anxious
may be at peace and free from worry:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For the isolated and housebound,
that we may be alert to their needs,
and care for them in their vulnerability:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For our homes and families,
our schools and young people,
and all in any kind of need or distress:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For a blessing on our local community,
that our neighbourhoods may be places of trust and friendship,
where all are known and cared for:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.

Merciful Father,

accept these prayers

for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We conclude our prayers

Almighty God,
in the midst of your people Israel
you raised up many saints,
who through faith in your eternal covenant
conquered kingdoms, did justice,
and won strength out of weakness.
Grant us to hold in glad remembrance
their holy lives and fearless witness,
that by your grace we may press on towards the goal
for the prize of our heavenly calling;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

[let us pray as our Saviour taught us,]

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen

We conclude

May God bless the work of our hands.
Amen.

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