

Christ Episcopal Church
 Dayton, Ohio
 All Saints' Day
 November 1, 2009

This is a special time in the church year that we pause to remember. But today we don't so much recall an event from the Bible or from the history of the Church or even a theological principal or doctrine. Today we remember people: grandparents, parents, spouses, children, dear friends and relatives who are no longer with us in this life.

We're especially conscious of members of our parish family who've died in the last year. Every Wednesday at the noonday service in our Chapel . . . we pause to pray, by name, for those in our larger community who died untimely deaths in the previous week from accident, suicide, or murder. We list their names from the past 12 months in the bulletin today.

In former times, the church made much more of distinguishing between the formal, official saints on November 1st. And the rest of all those others who had gone before us were recalled on All Souls' Day on November 2nd. But for most of us, the distinction doesn't seem to make much sense. We're all children of the one God. The author of the Apocryphal Book, Ecclesiasticus, put it this way:

Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning. There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valor; those who gave counsel because they were intelligent; those who spoke in prophetic oracles; those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people's lore; they were wise in their words of instruction; those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing; rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes—all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times. Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. *But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them.*¹

At one level, there's a place for celebrity within the church—where certain people's lives serve as special witness to the faith—whose deeds are especially exemplary and profound. But at a deeper level—within the life of the church and within the human family—we're all equal. We affirm this pretty emphatically when we drape

¹ Ecclesiasticus 44:1-9

the mahogany casket of the prince and the pine box of the pauper with the same funeral pall . . . so that as they enter the church for the last time, there's no distinction between them.

When I was a student (just a few years ago) almost all history was viewed from the perspective of the renowned: Kings and Queens, famous thinkers, inventors, poets, painters, writers of well-known texts, generals, presidents, prime ministers. Very occasionally, our history books contained a few paragraphs about the daily lives of common people in a particular era. But more recently, history is being looked at from the perspective of the common and less well-known folk. Historian Howard Zinn wrote the well-known *A People's History of the United States* and just this year Diana Butler-Bass published *A People's History of Christianity*, where she clearly highlights a much fuller and richer story of the church than can be captured when we only look at the celebrities . . . bishops, priests, monastics, theologians, martyrs.

A central feature of the All Saints' Day celebration is Holy Baptism. And although we don't have a new baptism today, we do have a whole church filled with the baptized, the holy people, the saints of God. And we'll shortly renew our baptisms as we re-affirm our baptismal promises.

Now let's take just a moment here to dispense with a misconception. When we refer to ourselves, and all those who have gone before us, as saints, as the *holy people of God*, we're not claiming a special goodness or virtue. Holy means "set apart for God's purposes."

Holy people are called to a godly purpose. Holy bread and wine aren't any different than bread and wine on your dinner table at home. But holy people and holy bread and wine serve to remind us that all people are invited to be holy and that all meals are meant to be sacred.

So this All Saints' celebration is a remembrance of all those who have preceded us as God's people . . . and it's an affirmation that we're the heirs . . . we're the current crop of saints, of holy people. *We are stewards of holiness*. We're called to godly purpose. This is our time to carry the baton, to write the future history of Christianity.

Stewardship is only partly about the financial gifts that make it into the offering plate. Stewardship is also about the use of what we do with all of our other money. Do we invest it in ways that make this world a better place? Do we spend it in ways that honor God's creation? Do we make it holy?

Stewardship is about the use of our time and our talent. And not just the time and talent that is spent and offered in church or church programs, but it's about what we do with all of our time and talent . . . in all venues . . . in all places . . . among all others beyond these doors.

Last week we spoke of the “priesthood” of all believers. Ordained priests stand before the altar and bless the sacramental bread and wine. But we all join the larger priesthood in baptism, where we’re entrusted with the treasury. As we welcome the newly baptized, we say . . .

We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.

During this month of November we’re thinking especially of stewardship in the midst of challenging times. But on this All Saints’ Day, we pause to remember our ancestors and friends and relatives who have entrusted to us with the sacred work of living out our time as *stewards of holiness*.

Amen.