

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 6, 2022

All Saints' Sunday

Solemn Evensong

5 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar and Chief Operating Officer*

on

Isaiah 65:17-25; Hebrews 11:32-12:2

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The Cloud of Witnesses

Isaiah, God proclaims a fresh start. Not a “going to heaven” but, again, “a new heaven and a new earth.” And under that new heaven, and upon that new earth, there is a city, created again, a new Jerusalem, one that has much more room than the original.

But this time, there will be no more invaders, no occupiers. Everyone will enjoy the reward of their own labor, for there will be no more invaders or occupiers under which to suffer, no one to burn their temple to ash. No more weeping, in fact. No more untimely deaths. No more dangerous animals. And God will be there! Listening to their requests, answering them before they can speak the words. And the universal blessing of this city will be Joy, and God will be with them in that, too, rejoicing with them in this renewed city and cosmos.

And this vision, like the reform of the Pantheon, is a radical break from the past, at first glance a kind of erasure, or even obliviousness, for it is said that “the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.” The salvation, it seems, comes by forgetting, because perhaps the memories will spoil the new Holy City. But I’m not so sure that it is *our* forgetting, but perhaps it is God’s forgetting, or at least God’s releasing the past with God’s great mercy.

What I find so striking this year, reading this passage from Hebrews, an early church epistle, is that the “cloud of witnesses” that the writer refers to is not comprised of Christians, but comprised of the great litany of Jewish forefathers and mothers in the faith, those who accomplished so much, and sacrificed so much, for God and for God’s people, though they wandered the desert, challenged authorities, and were scourged by this world in so many awful ways, a world, as the writer says, which was not worthy of them. And the writer says that “these all” from Gedeon to David and far more, they obtained a good heavenly report through their lives of faith, but “received not the promise.” This is a wistful image of those who came before Christ, of faith truly lived, but not necessarily fulfilled, or at least not able to enjoy God’s fulfilled promise in Christ during their lifetime. Like Moses, who died before reaching the promised land. His dedication and faith was foundational, and yet, a certain earthly reward, a promise of God, was not his to enjoy in this life, but to witness and enjoy in the next.

It is a pretty daunting meditation, that we, in Christ, have received the promise of Christ, when other giants in faith did not. We benefit from Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, as well as from all those who came before him to make Christ’s life possible.

And the writer of the Hebrews makes an explicit connection between his forefathers and mothers, and the Christians in his day, and in the days to come. God has provided something better for us, he writes, and that they, without us, should not be made perfect. An extraordinary thing to say! That we would be a part in making the patriarchs and prophets more perfect? Who are we to do that?

Well, it is not just a one-way street. We are a kind of fruit of their labors in the faith, a fruit that they did not taste in this life, but that they, in God, may “witness.”

A great cloud of witnesses, in fact, whose lives in God are not finished at all, people who still are watching and supporting us, longing for us to thrive and grow, for in us the happy by-product of our faith is that *their* lives thrive and grow, too. They help us to lay aside our burdens so that we might run with patience the race that they made possible to be set before us, and since the days of Christ, we proclaim, that cloud of witnesses keeps growing, first including those in faith who came before Christ, and then with all the saints whose lives were undergirded by the life of Christ, who made a way out of no way to get us where we are today.

Such a line of thinking has me reflect on what is at stake if we ask God to make us, like them, a saint, and we, with God’s help, truly pull it off. Think about all of the saints who have gotten you this far by faith. By God’s grace, we, too, will provide our own momentum to this relay race to that new heaven and new earth. We ask God to allow our lives to be made present in lives of the faithful to come. If we complete the race before us, we will become a part of that great cloud, too. And if not able to participate, able, in God, to witness the fruit of our spiritual labors, how the lives that we lived, the people we loved, blessed, and forgave, the gifts we gave away, the walls we built, if we truly built them in God’s name, we know that their shelter and benefits will keep magnifying and growing exponentially in the great chain of being and consequence that results from all holy acts and lives.

As the saints have done with us, it is far within the realm of possibility to ease the burdens of those who come after us, long we are gone, by our lives, and lived virtues and ministries.

If we dare to want to be a saint, we must recognize that it will never be just about us, but about all those who we relieve while we live and even after we are gone from this earthly plane. In Christ, and in them, our lives will continue, ever part of a timeless resource, that can be called upon at any time. It’s quite something. Something to celebrate, as we are tonight.

So whether or not I am speaking to saints, or perhaps saints to come, let us this night look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God, to rule the true world and our true hearts.