

Revolutionary Sainthood

Rob Crosby-Shearer, EC + Revelation 7, Matthew 5, Wisdom 5 + AbbeyChurch + November 5, 2023 – All Saints

Let us pray – in the words of the Indigenous elder, the Choctaw Bishop Stephen Charleston:

Come near now, saints of every tribe and clan, come closer, drawn by the flame of our prayers, called by the hearts of your family still here on Earth. You know how much we need you... Come down from all four sacred directions, elders of every nation, come walking on the air, with your shining faces set toward the shadows, casting hope with every glance, reminding us of your presence, showing us the power of what we pray. Come near to us, you host of goodness and mercy, surround us with your love, and hold us up as we walk the blessing way, the path the Spirit has set before us, the tomorrow that waits for us to discover. Lift us up to ride your wings, that we may raise the banner of light, inviting all of your relatives to sing the hymn of hope, to begin a new dance that will not end, to be like you: unafraid and forever believing. *Amen.*

Close your eyes for a second, if you will. *[pause]*. I want to ask you - what – or who - comes to mind when you hear the word ‘saint’? *[pause]*

If you’re one of those amazing social justice warriors among us, perhaps it’s a Martin Luther King Jr, a Dorothy Day, an Oscar Romero or Sojourner Truth... If you’re one of those who care about service with the poor, maybe it’s more a Mother Theresa or Greg Boyle-type figure. If you’re one of those mystics or contemplatives, perhaps it’s a Hildegard, Columba, or Julian of Norwich, or someone more contemporary like Thomas Merton or Howard Thurman. Maybe it’s one of the great siblings from our ancient stories; Mary, or the Syrophenician woman, or Sarah or Isaiah or Hagar or even Saint Paul... Or a leader in a spiritual community; a St. Benedict, a Clare or Francis, an Annesley or John Wesley (founders of Methodism), a Menno Simons (founder of the Mennonites) - or a Desert Mother.

Or maybe you’re far more protestant in your thinking – after all - we’re all saints, right? And, so, for you, it’s a matriarch who got on her knees and prayed for you night-after-night, or someone from your local community who brought you food when you were down – or even just the ordinary person sitting beside you right now.

And I think that all those notions are good and fair. For the idea of sainthood isn’t about any one type of person – or any one temperament. It’s expansive to all our spiritual elders and ancestors of all times - whomever some of our own favorites might happen to be.

But, today, I want to push the envelope just a little bit on our preferred pieties.

‘Cause, if we look at these sacred texts we’ve just heard read, all three of these passages link 'sainthood' not to good behaviour, nor right action, or mysticism, or spiritual discipline, or even excelling at taking down the man.

Instead, sainthood is linked to the idea of those who have experienced oppression and, in time, find freedom and release from that oppression.

And, dang – what a vision is *that* for the times in which we live.

I like this notion because it challenges our ideas of saints as being in some in-club, up high on some pedestal, or as whitewashed images of pristine piety.

Instead, scripture gives an image of sainthood as those who endure in the midst of suffering – and, then offers a radical vision of relief from that suffering. *[pause]*

The oldest of our texts from today, from the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew peoples' perhaps says it most starkly of the three:

The just and righteous stand with confidence in the presence of those who've oppressed them. In it, there's a reckoning of those oppressors who though they were the saints – but, who we hear have broken the hearts of these others. The ancient wisdom writer speaks of salvation – salvation which, we're reminded, comes from the same root word as *salve*; to heal, to be made free. Images of eternal life, and even jewelled crowns are invoked for the oppressed as symbols of what they could never have had - but more than any of that, the very arm of the divine is said to *shield them from further harm*.

The in-club mentality of so much bad religion is taken head on in this passage. The ones who thought they were the 'saints' are, instead, called to repentance – to reassess the lives of the oppressed and their pious self-importance dissipates, in a rather poetic way – (and I love this) like a *light frost*, being *driven away by a storm*, like *smoke before the wind*. *[pause]*

Jesus picks up this theme nicely in the famous beatitudes. It's not the pious, the rule-keepers, the ones who get religion or doctrine or ritual right who are blessed. Instead, it's the poor in spirit (or, in Luke's version – just 'the poor'), the mourners, the meek, the hungry, the broken-hearted, the merciful, the peacemakers and, here we go again – the persecuted.

We're back to saints as the oppressed and suffering. And, again, with a promise to have the reign of heaven, to inherit the earth, to be filled, to be called the children of God. If we were to read on, we'd see a similar list of 'woes' to those who think they're in the in club of power and religion.

And our third reading. Now, the book of Revelation can be tricky. It's been used for just about every agenda out there – including a twisted read that's bolstering the current conflicts in Palestine and Israel. For those of us who grew up with these interpretations – including some theologically horrific and awesomely campy 70's and 80's end time movies, it's a lot to untangle. So, I want to tread lightly, and steer well clear of any of those conspiracy theory militaristic interpretations of it.

But I also don't want to give it away to the fascists. Revelation literally means, of course, revealing. It's part of a kind of literature we call 'apocalyptic', which means something destructive or cataclysmic is happening around us. *And* it's a word of hope.

The luminescent imagery in today's reading is a break amidst that story of unravelling. It depicts a group of folk who have (quote) 'come out of the great ordeal'. These are the ones who have been the victims and survivors of the great collapse who, finally, are resting from

their labours. They have drawn on faith to survive and are coming to a place of balance and wonder.

Revelation is, ultimately, about liberation of the oppressed from the hands of the Empire. A story that ends with the consummation and renewal of all things in Christ.

It was arguably written about the years following Jesus' death when Christianity was a small, shaking Jewish sect in the Roman Empire and the empire was crushing both the iconic places of the minorities – such as the Hebrew temple - as well as infiltrating and oppressing the small, subversive house churches that the followers of the Jesus way had started.

These days, a lot of writers don't just see this text as being merely about some past thing, nor simply being a prediction of things to come. Yes, its stories likely referred to the events of the first century under Roman rule. *And*, yes, they speak prophetically to a future time of revealing or struggle followed by ultimate peace. But most importantly these words speak into the lives of all who are struggling, suffering and living under the yoke of oppression, disease, struggle, pain, hurt, relationship toil, poverty and violence in the here and now.

One of the interesting things about this passage, is that, if you look at the verb tenses in the Greek – they reflect this both-and-ness around time. The text starts in the past tense there *was* a great multitude from every nation. Then it has one pivotal verse in the middle – they *are* – present tense – they *are* before the throne of God, within God's temple... .and then the passage ends in future tense – they *will* hunger and thirst no more.' This feels to me like it echoes the timelessness of hope and comfort to our ancestors, to us and to a future reign of balance, peace and harmony.

And woah, the scene is just so evocative. Folks from every nation, all tribes, all people standing before – no, not a lion, not a warrior, not a conqueror – but a Lamb – being Jesus. And there's a whole creational adoration and worship thing going on – palm branches evoking another story of this lamb taking on empire by going to a cross - and strange creatures declaring the glory of God.

But most importantly, the promise. "...They will hunger and thirst no more. The sun won't strike them. The Lamb will be the shepherd that guides them to springs of living water" – and, I love this the most – "God will wipe every tear from their eyes". *[pause]*

I don't know about you, but it feels like there's a lot of tears in the world right now.

Look no further than the 11,000 plus souls killed in the past few weeks as one example. Most civilians. Many children. Or the 1600 folks living without housing right outside these doors. 1600.

But it's not just "out there". I hear that from a lot of you that I get the blessing to journey with in mutual struggle. Times can be hard – you don't need to be at the end of the barrel of a gun or bomb or living in a tent to experience the sufferings of life. So many of us wrestle in the day to day. Even the most privileged of us suffer in our shared humanity. Where is the hope? How will I survive? What is up? Am I alone?

In the midst of suffering and oppression of any kind – economic, political or personal - many ancient spiritual traditions, including ours, assert that there are ancestors who are both ‘beyond’ there here and now and, somehow, still present with us.

Friends, I’d assert today that we need to get beyond rational modernity and reclaim this radical belief held by so many ancients - including Christian and Indigenous traditions - A belief that that there is a world of spirit – and that our ancestors in faith are, indeed, with us.

And one of the reasons we Jesus-people proclaim freedom from oppression - is that a life without oppression; without the yokes of debt or guilt frees us to delve deeper into a world of wonder – where we’re free to worship the divine – to reflect back the blessing, and glory and wisdom and gratitude and honour back to the great Creator and Source of all things.

It’s a freedom to live deeply into the story of a God who comes to earth as baby, who proclaims blessing on those suffering when he speaks to the masses on a hilltop – and becomes the lamb who was slain to open the way to freedom of all the saints who need suffer no more.

And we, his followers, we, too, work and pray toward an end to all oppression. This keeps us off the pedestals and in the margins. And reveals to us a grace that sainthood isn’t about goodness but is about orienting ourselves to God - even in these shadows. It’s a call to come alongside the saints – those who are experiencing poverty of all kinds – and the be saints-in-solidarity, even in relative privilege.

So, a blessed all saints – all you beautiful saints and sinners.
Blessings even in your sufferings. Blessings even in your oppressions.

But more so, in Jesus name - blessings in our shared freedom!
Freedom to live in grace as we are –
Freedom to proclaim liberation in oppression, shielded in the arm of God.

This is a freedom in which is already here
and is *to be...* coming to fullness in the consummation in the reign of the lamb.

Let us continue to worship in endurance and resistance to the empires of oppression, to the violence of the world, and to the pain and brokenness in our lives.

And let us rest assured, that our ancestors in the Spirit – they are present with us.
Here and now. In this very place.

Present until that day when every single tear will be dried up.
When suffering will be no more.

Saints of all the ages, pray with us...

Lord Jesus, come soon. Amen.