



## Nov. 6, 2016/25 Pentecost/All Saints Sunday

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In 2nd Thessalonians, the epistle from which we read today, something fascinating is going on. Paul had only very recently written his first letter to this same community, and it seems he quickly wrote again to correct a mistaken impression based on that first letter: “As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here” (or, in another possible translation, “that the day of the Lord is impending”). Apparently, some significant faction within the community expected Jesus to return at any time. No, Paul says; he reminds his readers that there must first be a struggle with evil, the details of which his readers know. God’s will and purposes have not finished unfolding; as the New Oxford Annotated Bible says, the letter “prepares the church for a period of continued life in the world” (NT p. 296).

It is hard to know how long Paul thought this period would continue, or even if he had specific thoughts about it; being the spiritual giant that he was, I would not be surprised if he expected it to be a very long time, as it has of course turned out to be. Paul’s clear message is that there is work for the church to do in the world before Jesus returns. And this is really such an appropriate focus for us as we celebrate All Saints Sunday together. For even as we believe ourselves to be awaiting Jesus’ return, and with it the general resurrection, so also we believe ourselves to be surrounded by the communion of saints, by those who have gone before us in faith and whose examples remind us of how we ought to live our lives in the here and now.

I personally have just experienced the death of my own aunt, my father’s twin sister, three weeks ago today. Aunt Ruth was a model of utter constancy and consistency in her love and care for our family. I received a card from her on every birthday of my life, as did every member of our large extended family. She was youthful and beautiful – she seemed simply to stop aging at about age 65, and lived to 91 – but she was absolutely uninterested in calling attention to

herself in any way. This was especially true with regard to her faith; it was only upon her death that most of us learned that she had been serving weekly in an ecumenically-sponsored soup kitchen up until just a very few weeks ago.

I had the opportunity to visit my aunt just a few days before her death. An extremely private person, she was now confined to her bed, and so I entered her bedroom for the first time in my life. Over the headboard of her bed was a simple wooden cross. I'm sure you will know what I mean when I say that it felt like a very prayed in room. I understood her life better than I ever had before. Just as she had served quietly but regularly throughout her life, so too it was obvious that she had prayed quietly but regularly. It was the fruit of this that we had been witnessing all through her long, selfless, loving life.

The saints who have gone before us tell us much more about how to make good choices in the lives we are living now than about the glorified life that awaits us. As Jesus makes clear in today's gospel lesson, many questions and concerns that seem important – and indeed may be important – here on earth have no bearing in the resurrected life. We will understand that life when we join those who have gone before us in it. What seems certain is this: it's main resemblance to this life will be that God's love will be at the center of it all. The saints in each of our lives have been bearers of that love to us, inspiring and challenging us to be bearers of it to one another. In the life to come, we will join them in receiving it as God's pure, free gift, for all time. We will be, as they are now, Jesus says, "like angels ... children of God, being children of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36).

May God grant us grace this day to anticipate the certainty of this with faith and with thanksgiving.

Amen.