



## **ALL SAINTS SUNDAY**

*November 4, 2018, St. Paul's On-The-Hill, Charles D. Mayer*

Today provides a rare opportunity for an Episcopalian preacher to focus on a text from what is usually called “The Apocrypha.” This is a group of at least fifteen books – sometimes others are included – written in the inter-testamental period (between the Old and

New Testaments). The history and status of these books as holy scripture is a very interesting one; suffice it to say for now that they have been much more highly regarded by the church throughout its history than most of us raised in contemporary Protestantism would think. My boyhood Bible didn't even include these books. Yet all of them were present in the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, and their authority is unquestioned in the Roman and Eastern Orthodox traditions. So we Anglicans, who think of ourselves as both Protestant and Catholic, have some exposure to these texts, but not as much as many other Christians do.

All Saints is a very appropriate day for us to read a text from the Apocrypha, since on this day we remember and celebrate the whole Communion of Saints: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican – all who have gone before us in the journey of Christian faith. It is very much a day on which to celebrate our unity. And in the book we read from this morning – the Wisdom of Solomon – we find some very famous words that capture precisely the spirit of this day: “ ... the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God ... In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died ... but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good” (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

These words were written in Greek, by an educated Jew living outside of Palestine, sometime in the 100 years prior to the birth of Jesus. The treatment of the subject of immortality was a breakthrough in biblical thought (New Oxford Annotated Bible, p. 57 AP). And while the Wisdom of Solomon is very Hellenistic throughout, its treatment of immortality is very Jewish. Immortality was “a gift of God to the righteous, not the result of having an immortal or spiritual ‘soul’”) (NOAB p. 57 AP). The emphasis is not on the Greek philosophical idea of the soul, but on the very Jewish idea of righteousness in community before God. It is this righteousness that God rewards with immortality.

And so the pairing of this text with our reading from Acts is a very interesting one for All Saints Day. In Acts 4, in the earliest days of the church in Jerusalem, we are

presented with the picture of the church as a community in which “everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32c). Remember, this is the Jerusalem church, a very Jewish community. And what is being emphasized here is how people behave in their life together. It is this behavior that sets the community apart from the culture around it, and that God will reward with immortality.

It is hard to imagine anything more pertinent for us to consider and embrace in the times in which we are living. We are all still in shock following the terrible events at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Rarely has it been more important for Christians to remember our common roots with our Jewish brothers and sisters, and all of the ways in which our traditions are in close harmony. Jews and Christians alike value the idea of living together according to God’s will and purposes. Jews and Christians alike know that sacred texts teach us about God’s will and purposes – and we share a very significant portion of our sacred texts. And Jews and Christians alike understand that we human beings will wander into living in ways that are very far from what God has in mind if we stray from our religious communities and sacred texts.

We are all called to look different than the world around us. The very fact that we are here on Sunday mornings looks different than what is normative in our culture today. The contrast is becoming more and more stark; it is not such a far cry from the strangeness of that early Jerusalem church, holding all things in common in a society that was economically very stratified.

Saints look different than ordinary people do. Who are the saints that you remember today? How did they stand apart from the norms of secular life? I have mentioned in the past my mother’s Uncle Ed, one of my grandfather’s ten siblings. Like most of the rest of this Pennsylvania German family, he farmed all his life, resting only on Sundays. He was a vivid figure in my boyhood; quietly devout, a man of few words, who read his bible (almost surely without the Apocrypha!) in the little formal parlor in the farmhouse. He was always in overalls, adding a flannel shirt and a tie for church on Sundays.

Once, when I was fifteen, Uncle Ed approached me next to the tool shed on the farm. He had gotten wind from my mother that I was starting to consider studying for the ministry. As I said, he was a man of few words. I’m certain he had never initiated a substantive conversation with me before. But now, he stood before me, saying, “I hear you’re considering going into the ministry.” “Yes,” I managed to squeak out. “I hope you will,” he said.

Looking back, that pretty much decided the matter. The one time that saintly man really spoke to me, I listened. So it is when the righteous ones in our lives – the saints we remember on this day – prevail upon us. May we lift each one of them up today, with all our hearts. And may we be the saints that those who follow us remember and emulate.

Amen.