

## PENTECOST: SHARING NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

### The Feast of All Saints

November 1, 2010

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

### Who Are the Saints?

Were you to ask that question on the street, the most popular answer would probably be, “a football team from New Orleans!”

With no scientific polling data to confirm my suspicions, I venture to guess that the average church member would likely describe a *saint* as one of the famous figures from the Bible – Peter, Paul, Mary, Timothy – or perhaps, if someone more contemporary did come to mind, it would be a personage of the caliber of Mother Teresa or Billy Graham. We tend to think of saints as particularly holy people – not people like you and me.

This is the case, perhaps, because the English word saint comes from the Latin *sanctus* which means holy. The words sanctify, sanctification, sanctifier, sanctity and sanctuary all derive from this same Latin word that refers in one way or another to holiness, to making people and places holy, to consecrate or set apart, to purify, or to provide a place of refuge and protection. The fact that we tend to think exclusively of Bible characters as saints also speaks to the fact that we are woefully unfamiliar with the real lives of those holy folks.

Reading the Scriptures carefully gives us a rather different take on sainthood. Paul addresses the members of the churches to which he writes his epistles as saints, and few of those epistles pull any punches about the theological and moral problems faced within those local congregations. Biblical saints are not perfect people. They are, in fact, people very much like you and me.

What then are the distinguishing marks of a saint, if saints are sinners like everyone else? Our passage from Ephesians chapter one sheds some light. There we read that saints are those who set their hope on Christ (vs. 12). Relying on Jesus is essential to sainthood. As a result of relying on Jesus, something develops within the individual. Hope, generated by the power of God, becomes a central characteristic of saints. This hope allows us to “live for the praise of his glory” (vs. 12, *NRSV*). The first question in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Surely that is what it must be to live for the praise of his glory.

Saints are to hear “the word of truth ... believe in [Christ]” ... and be “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (vs. 13, *NRSV*). We are to listen to what God says; believe what God says, and live in such a way that distinguishes us from the world. That distinguishing mark is our love, shown for one another and for the world.

Paul tells us that the saints constantly have the eyes of their hearts open – not their minds in this case, but their hearts. The heart is where we develop relationships. Christianity is all about relationships – relationships with God and with one another. It is through relationship with God that God reveals himself to us, and it is through relationships that saints are used to reveal God to others.

Christians cannot fly solo. God means for us to live, worship, pray, praise and serve together. There is not one reference in the Bible to a saint; it is always about “the saints.” We are part of something bigger than ourselves when we come into relationship with God. We are part of Christ’s body, his family, a team that works together, complementing one another’s gifts, to bring the greatest possible glory to our Lord.

So who are the saints? All of us who collectively listen to God, trust God, place our hope in God, and desire to live for the praise of his glory by showing our love for God and one another ... people, I trust, like you and me.

This Reflection for the Feast of All Saints was prepared by the Rev. Thomas R. May, Director of Content Quality Assurance for the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship at the American Bible Society.

**A Prayer for the Feast of All Saints** (from the *Book of Common Prayer*)

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.