

For All the Saints

1 Timothy 2:5

A sermon for All Saints Sunday

Fifty years ago Protestants didn't celebrate All Saints Sunday. Now this Sunday has been transformed into a time of psychological comfort for those who have lost someone in the last year.

This festival raises three questions. First, who are the saints? Second, when they are no longer here, what is their situation? Third, can we communicate with them?

Behind such questions lies the big question: How do we decide such questions? How do you get there? Within the Christian church the real question has always been: What is salvation?

It is important to remember that how we decide about salvation is after all why we have had the Reformation and why, in the first centuries of the church, there were extended discussions about salvation and "the saints." We commonly think when decisions are made, we want to avoid the one ditch of having a Pope and bishops make decisions for us. Then we want to avoid the other ditch, that it's really my experience and it's up to me. We say: Let's chart a middle course and use the Bible. But that's not innovative at all. It wasn't even new in Luther's day. For at least four hundred years before Luther, everybody made decisions this way. Everybody said: Scripture alone! But "Scripture alone" doesn't solve the question of final authority. Everybody uses the Bible. What's peculiar about those who are in the Reformed Tradition (Calvinists, Presbyterians, and the like) and Lutherans, is that we use an entirely different method because what we ask is: What is the Gospel? It has to do what Paul says in Galatians 2:5, 14: "the truth of the gospel."

In our Lutheran Confessions the Reformers wrote about the "pure" Gospel, about preaching the Gospel purely (CA 7). What is that?

First, who is a saint? How do we decide? The common view among us is that it's about good works. What's the problem with good works? They can't hurt and they might do some good. But this kind of "saint" is also found in other religions.

Then who is a saint? A devout Lutheran grandfather was asked to stand up and say something to the family at a large family gathering. He rose and said: "I thank the Lord that he has washed my robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

The grandfather was quoting Revelation 7:14, but, in fact, he misquoted it! What Rev 7:14 says is: "These are they who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." That devout grandfather had unconsciously corrected the text in Revelation by using it as the Apostle Paul would have stated it. Paul says: God does it all!

The church in Corinth was a mess and a cesspool. In the introduction to both First and Second Corinthians Paul says: "To the saints in Corinth." Saints are those who have been forgiven by Jesus Christ. It isn't about good works.

Second, what the situation for those who have died and gone ahead of us? What about salvation? The British Nineteenth Century poet Browning wrote: "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" But heaven is not whatever I imagine it to be. Who are we to set terms, to define who God is, what he has done, and what he's going to do?

The US Lutheran-Catholic dialogue spent eight years discussing Mary and the Saints. The Lutheran team asked the Roman Catholics: What is your tradition about the saints and Mary? Two major Roman Catholic thinkers, Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, said: We have no real reason to say that the saints in heaven have any idea about us or are concerned about us. But the Roman Catholic team had to conform to their tradition: The Pope and the Bishops have declared that the saints in heaven, particularly Mary, pray for us, and we can pray to them and ask for their help.

What do we do? First of all, we ask: What does the Bible say? It's important to realize that in our Bibles there is never a hint of the idea that the saints in heaven know about us or pray for us. There is in 2 Maccabees, but that's not part of our Bible. There is an unusual verse, Zacariah 1:12, which may mean that the angels pray for us, but not the saints in heaven.

How do we solve this question? The Lutheran team on the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue answered: We honor the saints, but we do not pray to them or for them. We do not invoke them. 1 Timothy 2:5 states: "There is one mediator." Why are we adding other mediators? Furthermore, is not Christ's merit, what he did on the cross, all-sufficient? Are we going to add other merit?

Luther in the Smalcald Articles says: Isn't Christ enough? (Smalcald 2:1, CA 28:52, 66) Some people say: "What about rewards?" In Dante's Divine Comedy there are levels of heaven and levels of hell and different rewards and punishments. But Luke 6:38

says: “. . . pressed down, running over” beyond our imagination. Ephesians 3:20: “. . . exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.” In 1 Cor 2:9: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has entered into the heart of anyone, what God has prepared for those who love him.”

Third, we come to the matter of prayer. When we pray, we pray for people because we are commanded to and there is a promise. In the Large Catechism Luther writes that prayer is the Eleventh Commandment (Large Catechism, III/5; Tappert 420, Kolb/Wengert 441). Many people think like this: “I am spiritual; therefore I am religious in my own way. I pray. All religions are equal. Therefore all prayer is equal. I have nice thoughts about God. I have nice feelings about God. Therefore I am spiritual.”

C.S. Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters*. The letters are from a senior devil instructing a junior devil:

“Encourage spirituality. It’s one of the best things we have going for us. If your young man can only focus on cultivating his soul and thinking about spirituality, he’s ours! Persuade your young man to go on retreats and learn about silence and meditation, even the Lord’s Prayer is fine if it’s done the way most people mean it: My kingdom come, my will be done. Let your young man think that what is most important is that he has the right thoughts. Keep him from praying: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. And keep him from praying in Jesus’ name.”

What about prayer? It can be mixed up with so much else. But we have the command and the promise. We pray and it’s basic because the Lord promises to work that way. But the key to prayer is in Romans 8:26-27: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” (“Sighs too deep for words” in Greek is “babbling,” “baby talk.”) Then the Holy Spirit takes our “babbling” and translates our petitions into the right thing before the Lord our God. Therefore, as it says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, in that sense we are praying without ceasing through the Holy Spirit. We are told: Pray. It’s a command and a promise, but it doesn’t have to do with saints and Mary. Christ is enough.

To sum it all up: What our Christian faith means comes down to what the Gospel is. It’s summed up in the Nicene Creed in the phrase: “Of one substance with the Father.” That means it’s no big deal to say that Jesus is God. Everybody in the Fourth Century agreed with that. The point of the Nicene Creed is God is Jesus. That means

there is no God except Jesus Christ and that includes what he did. God came and died and rose again for you and me. That means the cross alone. All other claims are false. It's about what he did, what he is now doing, coming to us in his Word. Not that we have nice thoughts about God, or correct thoughts, or feel it, or think there's something in us, but he does it in spite of us, therefore we are absolutely certain and free in Him. This is the Gospel. Amen