

## **All Saints**

**November 1, 2007**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Our first reading is from the book of Revelation. The section just preceding today's passage described the end of the world. The sun became dark and the moon became red as blood and there was a great earthquake all over the earth. People tried to hide from all these terrible things and they asked: "Who can survive?" Today's reading answers the question - those who have followed Christ faithfully. The number 144,000 is a symbolic number, symbolizing perfection. Notice after it refers to the 144,000 it speaks of those who are saved as such a large crowd that no one could count them.

### **HOMILY:**

It's hard to believe it's already November. As this year comes to an end we are reminded that time in this life will come to an end for each one of us. It's not something most of us enjoy thinking about, but the Church reminds us through various liturgies at this time of the year that this life is not all there is. God has greater things prepared for us. And so we begin the month with the feast of All Saints, giving us an image of the glory God intends for us if we just travel along the way he has pointed out for us.

The first reading today is from the last book of the bible giving us a lot of hope that we will be among those who will enjoy God's love for all eternity. Even though Jesus told us that those who take the easy way that leads to destruction are many, and there are few who enter into life through the narrow gate, those few are still quite a sizeable number, a number too large to count. Those who have been designated by the Church as saints are very easy to count. It's obvious that the great number of saints our first reading tells us about include ordinary people like us, or like neighbors we've known, or parents or grandparents or relatives we've loved.

The hope that our first reading gives us is underscored in our second reading where we hear that "we are God's children." This is not just a nice, feel-good, poetic term, it is in fact what we really are if we have God's grace in us.

Our gospel reading shows us Jesus preaching the beatitudes as he begins the Sermon on the Mount. As we hear the beatitudes, we can perhaps think of some of the great saints who lived out the various beatitudes. For example: "blessed are the single hearted" such as Mother Teresa, or "blessed are the poor in spirit" like St. Francis of Assisi, or "blessed are those persecuted for holiness sake" such as St. Lawrence or St. Boniface. Which of the beatitudes do you think appeals most to you? On this day of All Saints it might be a good idea to choose one of the beatitudes and try to live it out more fully. I believe if we do, we will find that we are at the same time living out all the others to a greater degree as well. " Let us remember that Jesus ends them with these words: "Be glad and rejoice, for your reward will be great in heaven."

## 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 4, 2007

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading begins with the line: "Before the Lord, the whole universe is as a grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew." The balance the author is speaking of is a balancing scale where a grain would be a tiny weight that weighed something like gold or silver. The author could have had no idea how vast the universe is, but he is true in telling us God is greater. After this statement, the author of our reading goes into a long prayer of praise of God's greatness and love.

**HOMILY:** To help you see the humor and the drama in today's gospel, I would like you to imagine that the pope is making a visit to Washington D.C. Most of Washington's politicians and lawyers, lobbyists and ordinary people show up to welcome him. Dick Cheney, our vice president who also wanted to see the pope, was out hunting and he showed up late. The crowd was too big for him to get through and, since he is a little shorter than average, he wasn't able to see over the heads of people in the crowd. To see the pope's motorcade, Dick Cheney climbs up one of the cherry trees so he can see better. A few in the crowd may have enjoyed watching Dick Cheney climb a tree. But then the pope saw him there and said "Dick, hurry and get down. I'm going to stay with you this evening." Watching him "hurry down" might have drawn a few more chuckles. The pope might have even laughed, but then things got less funny. People started grumbling. The pope is playing partisan politics. The pope should be concerned about the poor and here he is catering to the rich. Then there would be those who believe that Dick Cheney is not a totally honest and virtuous person and they wonder why the pope is hanging out with people like that. Right away Dick Cheney declares that he's giving half of his oil stock to Catholic Charities and he is going to make right any mistakes that he was responsible for in the Bush administration!

Now you have a feel for the humor and the drama that one might have felt on that particular day when Jesus passed through Jericho. I want to clarify one thing: I used Dick Cheney as an example only because he is well known and because he probably wouldn't look very dignified climbing up or down a cherry tree. Zaccheus would have been well known. He was the chief tax collector in the area whose wealth most likely came from gouging the poor people he collected taxes from. The people would have viewed him as a traitor and a first rate crook. So let's reflect on what happened when Jesus asked Zaccheus to hurry down from the tree. Jesus had already seen the potential goodness in this man. With just a simple word from Jesus, new life filled Zaccheus. Jesus asked only for a meal and a place to stay for the night, but the heart of Zaccheus opened up completely. He announced he would make amends if he had defrauded anyone (as he surely had, for fourfold restitution was traditional in cases of flagrant theft). Furthermore, he committed himself to giving half of his money to the poor. The gospels never tell us of Jesus smiling, but surely on this occasion he must have been grinning from ear to ear.

The first reading tells us in prayer: God, "you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made." Although God's love was there before Zaccheus was even born, Zaccheus had to

do something to open himself to that love. And he did. He climbed a tree and before he knew it, Jesus was a guest in his home. Not only was Jesus his guest, but something else wonderful happened to Zaccheus. Zaccheus discovered that genuine happiness was not in material wealth but in God's love and in loving others. The gospel describes Zaccheus as small, but his encounter with Jesus allowed him to grow - not in stature but in maturity and love and joy.

What is the tree that we have to climb to see Jesus? In what way do we have to go out of our way to allow God to take possession of us? Do we need to spend more time in prayer? Do we need to be more generous with our money? Do we need to rise above our fears and mistrust and allow God to have more control in our lives? Do we need to come to Mass more often, perhaps even when we are not obligated to come? Do we need to forgive or to be forgiven? Do we need to control our impatience and trust more? The tree that we need to climb in order to see Jesus better may take many forms. Do we want to see Jesus badly enough to climb it?

No matter how small we may think we are, no matter how bad we may have been, no matter how insignificant we may feel, God loves us and he offers us his friendship and his life -- forever. Today at Mass he is inviting himself into our lives. As Jesus states in the Book of Revelation: "Behold I stand at the door and knock." How far will we open the door of our hearts to let him in?

## **32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**November 10/11, 2007**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Alexander the Great built an empire that stretched from Sicily and Egypt all the way to India. This included Israel. About a hundred and fifty years after Alexander died, the Greeks still governed the area. By that time they started enforcing Greek culture and religion on all those whom they ruled. In Israel this meant, for example, that it was a crime to circumcise a child. Copies of the Scriptures were burned. Jews could not follow their dietary laws or celebrate their usual feasts. The worship of Greek gods and goddesses was required. Some of the Jews gave in to the Greeks, others fought hard to hold on to their traditional faith in Yahweh. Our first reading gives us just a hint of how terrible this time was for the Jews. This reading is chosen because it reflects their faith in the resurrection of those who are faithful to Yahweh, and it prepares us for the gospel which also deals with the topic of resurrection.

### **HOMILY**

St. Paul said clearly, "If Christ is not risen, vain is our preaching and vain is your faith." Paul's words remind us how essential to our faith is the resurrection. It is the death and resurrection of Christ we celebrate each week at the Eucharist. We recall this mystery in the spring at Easter time because that's when Jesus died and rose. At this time of the year we reflect on death and resurrection because the year is coming to an end. The Church reminds us our own lives will

also come to an end some day. We have been called to share in Christ's risen life at the end of time. Most of us do not like to think about this life coming to an end, but if we don't think about it, we will not be very well prepared for it. It is important that we be prepared, because it's only by being prepared through our faithfulness to Christ that we will enjoy the wonderful things that are ahead for us. Jesus said: "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly." That more abundant life will be with him forever in risen glory.

Our first reading describes the heroic faith of many Jews during the difficult period when the Greeks were attempting to impose paganism on the Jewish people. That was about a century and a half before the birth of Christ. The faith that these faithful Jews showed was amazing, considering that the Jews had not had a long tradition of belief in the resurrection. That was a concept that only developed a few hundred years before Christ. We see from the gospel that not even all of the religious leaders of Jesus' day believed in the resurrection. The Sadducees were of the priestly class. We hear them in today's gospel asking Jesus a ridiculous question, not because they were interested in the answer, but because they wanted to embarrass him with a dilemma they thought he wouldn't be able to answer. Jesus answered them by saying their idea of the next life was incorrect. The law that Moses wrote about a man taking his brother's wife if his brother were to die was meant to preserve a deceased man's name and memory through offspring, to protect inheritance, and to secure the safety of the widow. There would be no need for all of that in the next life.

Jesus did not tell us much of what it will be like in the next life, because it will be so much different from anything we now know. It will not be a continuation of our present life. We will have our bodies back, not with all our aches and pains and imperfections, but in some glorified form. After our spirit enters into the glory of God's kingdom, we hope, then at the time of the resurrection, we will receive a body to match - a body that will radiate also God's glory. It is beyond our understanding now what this might be like. C.S. Lewis tried to describe it this way. He said a person who has experienced bodily resurrection "would have gone through as big a change as a [stone] statue...[being] changed from being a carved stone to being a real man."

The Lord reminds us today that the work of creation is not finished. Our spirits and the glorified body that we will have will be infused with the strength and beauty and glory and immortality of God. But we need to cooperate with this plan that God has for us. This is why Christ came to us, to show us the way. This is one of the reasons why we gather for the Eucharist each week - to remember what Jesus taught us and to remember what he did for us and why.

### **33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**November 18, 2007**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In our first reading today we hear from the prophet Malachi who lived about 470 years before

Christ. Many Jews at that time were apathetic about their religious duties and about keeping the Commandments. He warns his listeners that the day of reward and punishment is coming. Fire is the symbol that represents both the reward and the punishment. It will be scorching heat for those who have not followed God's ways, and will bring warmth and healing to those who have been faithful.

## **HOMILY**

I'm always feeling nervous around this time of the year. It's the season when they shoot turkeys!

In case you are wondering why the church is decorated in this fashion, we had our children's Mass on Friday and the theme was Thanksgiving. The tail feathers on the turkey on the altar each mention something that each kindergarten child is thankful for (their family, their teacher, their parents, their dog, their brother!) And the trees have fruit hanging on them, with lists of things the children in other grades are grateful for. As we all know, true gratitude not only inspires us to say "thank you" but also moves us to share our blessings. So the children brought in cans of food for our St. Vincent de Paul food pantry. By the way, about 85 to 90 percent of our school children come from families whose income is below the poverty line. One does not have to be rich to be generous and to share.

Life has its ups and downs. We have happy times and we have tragic times. And the Scripture readings this week remind us of both, the good times and bad. Today's gospel is about difficult times. It reminds us that some day this world, which we love, (most of the time) will come to an end. The destruction of the Temple was just a prelude to the end of all things that we treasure. We need to remember that this will happen, so we keep our priorities straight and make God's Kingdom our greatest treasure for that will never end.

On Thursday of this week, we think of the blessings we have received and we give thanks. We need to know, however, that gratitude is an attitude and not just something that takes place once a year. I've always preached that thankfulness is the key to joy. This is supported now by objective psychological research. Two psychologists from the University of Miami took three groups and randomly assigned them to take time once a week to focus on one of three things: hassles, things for which they were grateful, and ordinary things. The results were that people who focused on things for which they were grateful saw their lives in favorable terms. They had fewer headaches or colds, and they took better care of themselves. Their energy and joy and their willingness to help others was noticed by those who knew them. This did not happen with the other two groups. Further studies have confirmed those results. That's fantastic. If you want to live happier, healthier, more optimistic lives, practice being more grateful. Psychology is just confirming what we've always been taught. St. Paul, two millennia ago, said "Dedicate yourselves to thankfulness...Sing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns and inspired songs. Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Give thanks to God the Father through him." (Col. 3, 15-17) The Church tries to help us to become grateful if we're not, or to remain grateful if we are, by telling us to come to Mass every week. Another word for Mass is Eucharist, a Greek word meaning Thanksgiving. Too many people think Thanksgiving is all about lots of food and lots of football. That will not do the

job for our spirits that real gratitude will do.

The biggest obstacle to a grateful spirit is our own negativism. We tend to dwell on our problems, on what we don't have, on what's wrong with our lives. Certainly we have to try to deal with problems when they arise, but some things we just have to live with. If we are always focused on problems, that's a path that leads to depression. To develop an attitude of gratitude, we have to consciously focus on what's right with our lives, what cheers us up, what we have, not what we wish we had. It takes a conscious effort and discipline to do this sometimes. When we begin seeing how blessed we are, it's like opening the shade and letting in the sunshine, or as Malachi says it, "there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays."

Gratitude expressed to others almost always comes back around. One study, for example, showed that waitresses who wrote "thank you" on the check they presented at the end of a meal received on average 11% more tips than those who didn't. Gratitude does have a boomerang effect.

We are reminded in Mass today how blessed we are. Sure there will be difficult times in life, but God will not abandon us. He will help us through. If we follow the wisdom and the way of life he has revealed to us we can, with gratitude, look forward to eternal joy. "Not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure your lives." Amen.

## **Christ the King**

**November 25, 2007**

### **INTRODUCTION**

When the first king of Israel, King Saul, was killed in battle, the southern part of Israel chose David as their king. The northern part chose Ishbaal, King Saul's son, to be their king. Ishbaal was inept and after seven years of chaos, the northern tribes turned to David and asked him to rule them also. This is where our first reading comes in. David was a successful leader and, in spite of some serious misbehavior, was viewed throughout Jewish history as an ideal king. The Jews always hoped for another king like him. When a king assumed his office, he was anointed and thus the ideal king the Jews longed for was often referred to as "the anointed one." The Hebrew word for this is "Mashiah," or as we say it: "Messiah." When Mashiah is translated into Greek we have "??st??" So when we call Jesus "Christ" we are in effect saying Jesus, the King. Christ's kingdom is not an earthly one, as St. Paul tells us, but it is eternal and a sharing in God's own authority and power.

### **HOMILY**

This will be my last homily for this year. Before everyone cheers or wonders whether I am taking an extended vacation, I should tell you I'm talking about the liturgical year -otherwise known as the Church year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, and we begin again a new Church

year, preparing ourselves to celebrate Christ's birth. Before we know it, we're into Ash Wednesday, and it is especially early this year. The last time Lent came so early in the spring (and that's because Easter is early) was 89 years ago. Starting next Sunday, then, we begin to recall the major events of Jesus' life: his birth, his death, resurrection, ascension and his sending of the Holy Spirit. After Pentecost, as usual, we hear about his miracles and his teaching as presented to us in St. Matthew's gospel. And as usual, at the end of the liturgical year, we will again celebrate the feast of Christ the King.

The feast of Christ the King was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. You might wonder, didn't Pius XI know kings are not so popular any more? But what else could we call Christ? Should we call him instead a president, a prime minister, the chairman of the board, a dictator, president for life? The title "King" is most fitting for Christ. But he is not the same as any other king. His power is absolute and eternal. He has received his authority and power from God the Father and that will never change.

When we think of kings, it is automatic to associate them with castles and crowns, royal robes, jewelry, servants, armies and various symbols of wealth and power. Today Jesus, our king, is pictured hanging on the cross, his crown a crown of thorns. His small group of followers is nowhere to be found except for his mother, one faithful Apostle, and a couple of women. No rings were on his fingers, just nails in his hands and feet. No royal robes, instead he was most likely stripped naked as was the Roman custom. Later centuries have covered him over with a loin cloth for modesty. No one is cheering him or praising him. His enemies are outdoing each other mocking him. After three years working to establish a kingdom of love, he is condemned as a criminal, tortured and executed. He warned his followers some of them would suffer in a similar fashion. It's a wonder he had any followers at all.

I am always impressed when I think of what Jesus did in three years. Moses labored for 40 years, Buddha 45 years, and Muhammad 23. The carpenter on the cross, with the sign above his head, Jesus Christ, king of the Jews, who came from a politically and religiously insignificant part of an insignificant country, influenced this world more than any human being that ever lived. After two thousand years a billion people, including ourselves, call him our king! If some of his followers reflected his teachings more faithfully, there might be six billion who now follow him. Jesus is a king who does not parade around in worldly glory or demonstrate worldly power. However, he is greater than any king who ever lived, for he is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation."

Our king does not rule by arms and weapons. Arms and weapons get people's attention. Without having someone to stand over us with a club or a gun, we are tempted to feel "why do I have to do what they tell me?" A lot of people feel that about Jesus. The people who put him on a cross felt that way, except for his few friends and the thief who asked to be remembered when Jesus entered his kingdom. The Jewish leaders thought they would be rid of this troublemaker, this bossy person who went around telling people how they should live. They didn't understand the power that he lived by and taught by, the power of love. He will always be a king who rules with love, but whether or not he is king in our lives and in our hearts is up to us. If we respond to

him in love, it will lead us into his kingdom of new life.

A cartoon in the New Yorker showed two fellows walking to lunch one day and the one was complaining to the other: "my boss keeps telling me what to do." Authority is not popular, we like to make our own rules, even with regard to God. The new age theology, which is really a return to paganism, views Christ as a nice guy who overlooks our bad behavior and is going to reward all of us in the end, no matter how we've lived. He will forgive us if we turn to him. Notice his words of forgiveness were directed only to one of the two crucified with him. We cannot take our salvation lightly. The cross was not a joy ride for Jesus. Salvation is serious business and Jesus suffered in order to win salvation for us. But he can only save us if we do not forget that he is always our king, not just in an abstract way but in our concrete, everyday lives. Amen.