

Blessed Saints, Citizens of Heaven

SERMON TEXT: Matt. 5:1-12 & Rev. 7:9-12

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Dearly beloved of God, blessed saints, our sermon text for this morning is taken from our Gospel lesson as well as the following passage from the Book of Revelation:

After this I, [John], looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Let us pray...

O Heavenly Father, in uniting us to Your Son, Christ Jesus, our Saviour; You have made us Your people, set apart by Your indwelling Spirit. You've made us citizens of Your heavenly kingdom in accord with Your Word of promise. As Your Church, sanctify us and sustain us through Your Word. Touch our hearts and minds as my lips proclaim both Your Law and Your Gospel. To You alone be all glory as the praises of Your blessed saints recall all that You have done in sending unto us Your Son! Amen.

Dearly beloved in the Lord, the text that I just read from St. John's vision speaks of the saints throughout the ages— both those known and unknown to us— who've attained the beatific vision of God, that joy and happiness which comes from seeing God. They behold Him not imperfectly through faith, but face to face. They find their repose in Him. Being absent from this body of sin, they are at home with Him in holy bliss as they await the promise of the Resurrection, the day when the trumpet will sound and mortality

will put on immortality as the corruptible gives way to that which is incorruptible. The size of the throng of saints is unimaginable; the sweet sound of their song inconceivable. Indeed, those saints who have gone forth before us now see what no eye on earth has seen, hear what no ear on earth has heard, and know what no heart could ever imagine as an ever present reality. Today, their reality converges with our own as we gather in worship with all of the company of heaven, with angels and archangels, to evermore laud and magnify God's glorious name, praising Him as His people. They rejoice and are happy as citizens of heaven, God's holy ones. As for us? We too have cause to rejoice. We too have reason to be happy. Here, on earth, in the very midst of death and darkness, we too are counted as being blessed, blessed by the assurance that, as it is written, "*Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.*" We too, as we confess in our creed, "look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." As we wend our way through this world toward that world to come, we stand amidst a cloud of witnesses to God's faithfulness. From age to age unto the ages of ages, we are His own. We are His blessed saints, citizens of heaven.

Yet, do you see yourself as a saint? Do you dare to count yourself among the countless holy ones drawn from every nation, tribe, and tongue that now encircle the throne of God? Does the thought of being a saint make you uncomfortable? Do you reserve the term to describe those martyred for their faith? Do you limit it to those who've lived morally exemplar lives? How about those who've devoted themselves to

service through missions or holy orders? Perhaps you think that those are the ones who can be called saints while you only merit the moniker of sinner by comparison? In this morning's Gospel text you heard that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, the meek inherit the earth, the peacemakers are called sons of God, and that it is the pure in heart who get to see Him. Did Jesus' words leave you with a sense of lacking something, as being anything but blessed? Unfortunately, if it did, you are not alone, but in good company with a multitude probably as vast as that of the saints on high.

Unfortunately, for many people Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is understood as Law and not as Gospel. For many, the Beatitudes have come to comprise a kind of Magna Carta which outlines the requirements for heavenly citizenship. For many, the Beatitudes, which have been numbered from seven to as many as ten, are often seen as the New Testament equivalent to the Ten Commandments. Yet, this is most unfortunate because the repeated use of the word "blessed" harkens back to the Psalms where it is not expressing a future desire or even a present condition, but pronouncing a judgement to the effect that the persons indicated are to be considered fortunate. Jesus speaks to His disciples in terms of good news whereby the word "blessed" is intoned again and again like the peel of a bell ringing from the cathedral spires of heaven's kingdom, calling to all men on earth to come forward. Yet, if we hear it as Law, then it is more like a death knell, wherein the bell tolls for each and everyone of us.

Understood as Law, the Beatitudes reveal that we are sinners who have proud spirits which thirst for any number of things except righteousness. We are not pure in heart as our inability to maintain peace over our proclivity to cause strife surely proves.

So then, how is it that I can call us saints? How is it that we can be called blessed?

Where is the Gospel? Well, first and foremost, we need to understand that the word “saint” actually refers to being set apart unto God. It is not about being perfect. It is not about merit. It is not about what you have. So when Jesus states that it is the poor in spirit who are blessed, He is speaking of those who’ve been brought to see that they are, in fact, not saints in the way the world often uses the word. He is speaking of those who’ve been brought to see themselves as morally bankrupt, as sinners, with nothing to offer to take away the guilt of their offence. This is the work of the Law. It shows you your poverty. It is when we see our sorrowful condition— recognizing that there is no meritorious good to be found in us as our very thoughts, words, and deeds accuse us as we break God’s Commandments daily (being guilty of all, even if only breaking one)— that we are made ready to repent and believe the good news of God’s kingdom. Those who trust in their own supposed goodness will simply not be numbered among the saints for their hope is in themselves, having forfeited their faith in that promise which alone ushers us into God’s kingdom. For such, there is no blessing or promise of heaven, for the kingdom of heaven belongs not to proud souls, but to the poor in spirit.

Being brought low by the Law, we are then raised up by the Gospel. Realizing our spiritual poverty we turn to Jesus who “though He was rich, yet for [our] sake He became poor, so that [we] through His poverty might become rich.” Through His sacrifice, not our own, we are blessed. In seeing our sinful condition, we mourn. In mourning, we are promised comfort through His promise of salvation. Being humbled, we inherit all the things which we through foolish pride would seek to wrench from God’s grasp. The Lord

stands ready to freely give good gifts from His hand to those whose hearts have been set aright to pursue after His own. Their desire is for righteousness before the Lord. They want to stand rightly in His presence. His promise is that that which they cannot provide for themselves will be given and their longing will be satisfied. This is pure Gospel! This is why we are called “blessed”; this is what it means to know bliss by being endowed with divine favour. Our sainthood rests in the work done for us through Christ’s cross. We are blessed because we are blessed by Christ— Christ crucified, the very power and wisdom of God! *He* took our guilt and shame, and *He* gave us *His* own righteousness. *He* called us— the foolish, the weak, what is low and despised in the world— to *Himself*. *He* set us apart through *His* work and not our own. In our Baptism, we were united to *Him*. *He* made us citizens of *His* kingdom. *He* became our King and *His* kingdom became our country. We were marked as *His* blessed saints, citizens of heaven.

Now, just as the words “blessed” and “saint” can be misunderstood, so too can the word “kingdom”. The kingdom of heaven which is ours is not a spacial reality hemmed in by any kind of borders, but rather it is the reign of God in Christ Jesus, the promise of God’s abiding presence. Its blessings are ours through the forgiveness of our sins which brings us into communion with God and one another. The Beatitudes speak of the attitude of the heart which through repentance and faith now numbers us among the multitude of saints in heaven. This citizenship calls us to show mercy as we have been shown mercy, to remain pure by not turning away from the grace given us by God through His Gospel, and to proclaim peace with God to the world which He so loves.

This too is not Law, but a sign of the Gospel. We who in our spiritual poverty mourn over our sinfulness and cry out to the Lord for mercy now show mercy because we have received mercy, even the very righteousness of Christ. We who had no where to turn, turn to God alone to see only Him. We who have been pardoned by the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, now bring His message of peace to others because, now being counted as sons of God ourselves, we seek to serve as He served since we've been entrusted with the Ministry of Reconciliation in which God Himself is making His appeal through us. This is how we live out our citizenship.

Of course, while citizenship comes with both rewards and responsibilities, it also brings about conflict. The blessed saints, the citizens of heaven, often stand in contradiction to the ways of this world. Throughout the ages they've incurred the wrath of the prince of this world, the Devil. Persecution. Rejection. Opposition. Indeed, the sword of the state itself has been brought down upon many a faithful witness since the time of the prophets to this very day. Yet, none of this can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Our citizenship remains. We are *His* own. *He* has set us apart for Himself. We *are* blessed. *We* are His own.

Beloved in the Lord, blessed saints, citizens of heaven, *you* are numbered among the vast array of people from every nation and kindred. *You* are cloaked in Christ's righteousness as are they. *You* are among the blessed ones who've inherited heaven and earth in Christ. *You* who have nothing to give God have been given everything in Christ for *yours* is the kingdom of heaven. *You* who mourn your sinful state have found the comfort of forgiveness in Christ. *You* who were naked with your sin and shame laid bear

before God have been cloaked in Christ's righteousness, baptized in His holy name. *You* who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled every time that you commune at this altar and feast upon that most sacred body and blood that was given for you for the forgiveness of your sins. *You* have received mercy and, as the sons of God, *yours* is the kingdom of heaven. Great is our reward in heaven where our true citizenship is found! So then, blessed saints, let us be truly happy and exceedingly glad! Let us rejoice with all the saints in heaven and on earth, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, for all that God has done to make us one: one with Him; and one with each other, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Truly blessed are His saints whose true citizenship is of heaven! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.