

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives

In the name of him who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God, dear friends in Christ: Last week during our worship we celebrated Reformation Day, so called because it's the day on which Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses to the door of the church of the Wittenberg castle. This was the act that ignited the spark that when fanned into flame by the Holy Spirit caused the Light of the Gospel to shine more brightly in the Christian Church than it had for centuries. Today we celebrate All Saints', a day on which the people of God draw inspiration and encouragement from the lives of those who have gone before us in Christ and who now rest from their labors in glory with him.

Now, these two celebrations, Reformation and All Saints, we observe every year at this time (the end of October and first of November). On the surface, they don't seem to be very much related; but it turns out that they are. You see, Luther very deliberately chose the Eve of All Saints' as the day to post his incendiary theses against the sale of indulgences. There were two reasons for this. First, he knew that there would be a big crowd of people gathered the next day for the All Saints observances, and he wanted his theses to get maximum exposure. So, part of it was publicity. But an even bigger reason was that he was opposed to what most of those people would be coming to do in Wittenberg on All Saints Day. And that requires a bit of explanation.

It happened that Luther's prince and patron of the university where he taught theology owned one of the most complete and elaborate collections of *relics* in all of Germany. He had spent a fortune on it, and he was extremely proud of it. What are relics? They are objects somehow connected to the lives of people who have been officially named saints by the Roman Catholic Church. Relics are categorized into three classes. First class relics are actually parts of a saint's body: could be fingers, a skull, a bone, maybe a tooth or a lock of hair. Second class relics are items a recognized saint owned and used; say a Bible, prayer beads, maybe a cross they wore, or any article of clothing. Then you've got third class relics, which are something the saint touched or blessed for someone else during his or her life. In the middle ages people were crazy for such relics and there was an amazing amount of trade and trafficking going on in this sort of merchandise. And a lot of the stuff was totally fake. Just for example, it was said that Jesus had twelve disciples; and 18 of them were buried in Spain, or that you could build whole villages with the scraps of wood that were said to be either from the cross or manger of Christ. But you name it, and someone claimed to have it: John the Baptist's head, the tip of the lance that pierced the Lord's side, the chains that were used to bind St. Peter, the sword that chopped off Paul's head, even drops of milk from the Blessed Virgin's breast – and these were the big ones. The vast majority of relics were just little scraps of cloth or hair from lesser saints. But regardless of how insignificant an item was, it would likely be placed in some elaborate case with gold filigree and encrusted with gems, and it would come with a document certifying its authenticity.

But maybe you're wondering why someone would want *any* of this stuff. Again, two reasons: one, because people are naturally superstitious, and they thought of relics as sort of holy good luck charms. Some were thought to ward off evil spirits or disease, for example; others were said to have the power to work mighty miracles. Now, that sort of nonsense is bad enough; but even worse from a theological point of view – and why Luther was so opposed – was the second reason: it's what people were instructed to do with the relics. You know that he was against the sale of indulgences, which were official documents that the Church said cancelled the penalty of sins. By buying an indulgence, people were told that they could knock off so much time of their sentence in Purgatory. Well, another way to achieve the same result was to venerate the relics of saints. That is, you could stand in front of a relic, look upon it reverently while contemplating the life of the saint connected to it, and pray to him or her for intercession. The idea was that the saint up in heaven would look kindly upon you for your admiration of their life and sacrifices, and answer your prayer by turning to Jesus and saying, "A friend of mine needs a favor. Can you reduce his sentence in Purgatory a bit?" And relics were assigned relative values depending on what class they were and how close the saint in question was to the top, so to speak. So, for example, a genuine lock of hair from Saint Peter, say, would be worth

much more than a splinter of wood from a chair that St. Tobias allegedly sat in once. And so ten minutes venerating the former would be worth a huge reduction of time in Purgatory, while the same time spent venerating the latter, not so much. And saints could also be called upon for help in their specialty areas. St. Hubert, for example, is the patron saint of butchers, metal workers, and people bitten by rabid dogs. If you fell into one of those categories, you went to him for assistance knowing that you'd be more likely to get what you wanted if you were venerating one of his relics when you asked.

Now, with all this in mind, what happened on All Saints' Day was that Luther's prince made his magnificent collection of relics available to the general public. Normally they were locked up for his personal use – like I said, they were worth a fortune, so they had to be kept under lock and key; but on All Saints he very generously opened the doors so that everyone, all his subjects from the highest of nobles to the lowliest of peasants could, *for a reasonable fee*, take advantage of the grace and forgiveness the church promised to those who would spend a few moments directing their religious devotion to these trinkets and shriveled human remains. So, the whole thing was part carnival sideshow, part really bad theology, and part taking advantage of people so desperate for help they'd be willing to look for hope in just about anything. And people from all over the kingdom came crowding to take advantage of it.

It broke Luther's heart to see people so deceived (as indeed he himself had once been) by such foolishness. Having rediscovered for himself several years earlier the simple truth of the Gospel – the truth that God forgives sin freely for Jesus' sake on account of his innocent suffering and death for us – he wanted everyone to share the joy, peace, and certainty he had come to know in Christ. He also wanted people to know that we have but one advocate with the Father, the Lord Jesus, God's own Son, and that through him we have direct access to the throne of grace. God hears and has promised to answer our prayers for Jesus' sake. We don't need layers of middlemen giving their approval. And so, in posting his Ninety-five Theses against indulgences on the Eve of All Saints, Luther was trying to kill two very bad birds with one stone – or, to be more precise, with one stroke of his hammer.

We, of course, are the spiritual heirs of his work to set the church back on its proper Christ centered course. And living as we do with the benefit of his spiritual insights almost five hundred years later, it's hard for most of us to imagine what it would be like to grow up with and firmly believe the sort of superstitions and teachings that were once common in the church. But that isn't to say they've been entirely eliminated. It pains me to say that while the worst abuses are not so flagrant or common anymore, at least not in this country, the basic doctrines in the Roman Church concerning relics, who the saints are, and what function they now serve hasn't changed. And even in our own circles there's still some confusion. Just this last week I read about an LCMS pastor who resigned his call and left for the Eastern Orthodox Church (along with about a third of his congregation) in part because he thinks we're wrong for not praying to the saints. Because of this I thought it would be good for us to spend the time we have left this morning answering some basic questions like: What is a saint? How does someone become a saint? And what role if any do the saints play in the lives of believers today?

The Roman Church answers these questions by saying that the saints make up a very small percentage of the total number of Christians. And what they are is the cream of the crop, so to speak. They are people who led especially holy and God pleasing lives, and who died or at least suffered substantially because of their faith; or, if they weren't persecuted, who at least performed verifiable miracles. These miracles could have taken place either before their death, or after death in response to someone praying to them. And the Roman Church has a fairly involved process of determining who is or is not a saint that can take anywhere from a few decades to several centuries to complete. It begins with reviewing eye witness testimony, collecting stories about a person's life, examining alleged miracles to see if they're genuine, and other steps which, if everything checks out, may lead to what's called *beatification* – which is kind of like being on deck for sainthood. Then after still more investigations and deliberations and a long cooling off period, the Pope may eventually *canonize* the person, at which time they become a saint of the church. If someone achieves that last step, then they are by definition someone whose life was so holy and full of good works that he or she had more merits than sins to their credit at the time of their death, so they get to skip Purgatory and go directly to heaven. There they join what's sort of a club of the super-sanctified who can hear prayers that are addressed to them and relay them on to the Lord, with whom they carry a lot more weight than regular Christians. In

addition to that, the extra credits the saints earned in life by their good works can be assigned to those who pray to them.

That's the idea, anyway. And hopefully you recognize some serious problems with it. But to drive the point home, I'd like to give you an example of how this kind of understanding can lead to dangerously unchristian attitudes and behaviors. It's the true story of Saint Pedro Claver who lived in Columbia in the 1600s, about 100 years after the Reformation. At that time, huge numbers of Black Africans were being imported to work as slaves on the plantations in South America and the Caribbean; and Pedro, who was a Jesuit monk, was horrified at the abuses he saw. He dedicated his life to bringing the Gospel to these poor slaves and, as much as possible, making their lives better. He treated them as equals, with dignity and respect, sometimes more than he paid to their owners and other Europeans. This made him the enemy of the rich land owners and the elite of Colombian society. It happened that after a life of doing his noble work, in his last years he was struck by a debilitating disease that left him bedridden. And in what is kind of a sad ironic twist, the man who had devoted his life to making the lot of slaves better was put in the custody of an embittered slave who abused him terribly. He kept Pedro practically starving, unwashed, and lying in his own filth for days on end. This went on for many months. His fellow Jesuits did little to help because Pedro's love for the slaves made him unpopular with them too. Well, towards the end, word got around that he was dying, and suddenly all the high society had a change of heart—sort of, anyway. They realized that they had a living saint among them and many flocked to his bedside—not to offer him any comfort; but rather to take for themselves some relic they could use later. They stripped his tiny cell bare, even taking his clothes and the flea infested blanket he used to cover himself. Knowing what a valuable relic it would soon be, his own bishop made the poor dying man relinquish the crucifix he held clutched to his heart. You've heard the expression, "Everyone wants a piece of me"? In this case it was literal. What they were hoping to do was have applied to themselves in the eyes of God Pedro's acts of goodness even while they were in the process of robbing him of his last comforts. It makes me wonder how these people prayed to him for intercession later on: "Holy Saint Claver, do you remember me? I'm the guy who stole your bed-sheets – got'm right here, see? Now, I was hoping you could put in a good word for me with the Lord." Now that, I admit, is an extreme example. On the other hand, where do you suppose people acquired most first-class relics if not through a ghoulish form of grave robbing?

You see, what this whole approach does is make the saints into little versions of the Savior. They become partners with Christ in helping you get to heaven. That devalues and denigrates the work of Christ for us on the cross, as if he and his righteousness were not all we need to stand before God in holy innocence. That, of course is the biggest problem because it overthrows the very foundation of the Gospel. But beyond that, when the saints are seen in this way, they're not really like the rest of us. In life they had something, certain gifts or powers that we haven't got; and so they end up being understood as class of beings between us and God. They are on a different level than the rest of us. So, we can admire them, we take advantage of them by asking for their help or having their good works counted to our credit; but we can't be like them. How very different is the biblical understanding of the saints and their role that we heard in today's Epistle reading.

There's a scene in the *Wizard of Oz* that I'm sure you're familiar with. It's where the four companions are waiting to see the Wizard, and the Cowardly Lion is explaining the value of courage to them. In the process, he asks a series of questions like, "What makes the Elephant charge his tusk, in the misty mist and the dusky dusk? What makes the Muskrat guard his musk?" His answer is always the same: "Courage!" You remember the scene? Well it wraps up with him asking, "What have they got that I haven't got?" To which his friends immediately reply, "Courage!" And the Lion responds, "You can say that again!"

In the passage we heard from Hebrews, the writer is using the same technique as the Lion, but in the opposite sense. He's been running down a long list of Old Testament saints, people like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua – the great heroes of the Bible, and he's been recounting the remarkable stories of their lives. And at each point he explains what it was exactly that gave them ability to do the mighty things they did for the Lord. "*By faith*" he says over and over again. "By faith Noah built the ark", "by faith Abraham left for the Promised Land and offered up his son, Isaac" and so on. The section we heard picks up as he's wrapping up by naming Gideon, Barak, Samson, and others, who "through faith conquered kingdoms, shut the mouths of lions, withstood the furnace flames, routed armies, faced persecution, torture, and death in horrible ways. And how'd they do it? Through faith, that's how." The implied question at each point is, "What did they have that

you haven't got?" And the answer is, "Nothing. Not one thing. All they had was their faith, which is the same thing you've got." His whole point is that these renowned saints were ordinary people just like you, sinners saved by grace through faith – and just look at the extraordinary things the Lord was able to accomplish through them through the same faith you have. The upshot is that the Lord means to do extraordinary things with you through your faith.

In fact, what he suggests is that you have more than they did. They had faith in a promise yet to be fulfilled; but they didn't know exactly how the Lord would do it. They knew that the Lord had promised to send a Savior; they had certain puzzle pieces of prophecy – but not one of them could have imagined the complete fullness and majesty of what happened when God sent his Son into our flesh to bear our sins on the cross. This perfect and overwhelming display of God's justice and sacrificial love for lost mankind was a hidden mystery that they trusted in even though they couldn't envision or comprehend. But *you do know* how the Lord did it. Your faith is based not on a Savior yet to come; but rather on one whom God already sent. It is now history, and you have, in a sense, seen the Savior work salvation for us on the cross. And now in worship you celebrate this, and in the Sacrament of the Altar you touch and taste it and so receive its blessings to yourself to strengthen your faith. In light of this, the writer of Hebrews is saying that if the Old Testament saints did extraordinary things armed only with their murky faith, how much more can the Lord do through you whose faith is founded on the full revelation of God in Christ?

But it isn't just great big spectacular deeds we're talking about. The point is that through faith in Christ *you are* a saint of God. And the things you do in faith are therefore extraordinary deeds – the work of saints – made so by Christ in whom you trust. Look at it this way: by faith you get up in the morning and go about your business, you eat breakfast, get the kids ready for school, do your job in whatever calling God has placed you, you rest, you play, you do everything else that has to be done. And all those things you do are made extraordinary; they are sanctified and made pleasing to God through your faith in Jesus. And as you live this extraordinary life through faith, the saints of God who have gone before serve as both models and witnesses to what the Lord can do and ultimately will do with you when you too are received into the company of those who now rest from their labors. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, as did the saints who went before, and through faith in him, let's live extraordinary lives as his saints here and now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!