

From The Pastor

What do you suppose heaven will be like? It is, of course, impossible to know, yet we do have some images and understanding from scripture. Our faith teaches that at death the soul is released from the body and goes to God. We talk about judgment day, and purgatory. Is our going to God immediate, or is there an in between time? These are questions, no doubt that all of us have asked. It is a good thing to ponder and anticipate heaven.

In the readings today, assigned to the Feast of All Saints, we have the image of a vision that sees angels and throngs of believers praising and worshiping God. This is consistent with the expression of what we know as the beatific vision; seeing God as God is. Before the throne of God this great throng of believers, those washed in the blood of the Lamb cry aloud, 'salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb'. Then in turn, the angels worship God and exclaim. 'Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom, and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.'

Maybe we relate to this image, or maybe we don't. Our faith proclaims that God is love, a transcendent spirit of truth and life. What else would one do before the fullness of all that is? It is right and true that all adoration, worship, and praise is due to our God. This is the God who created us purely out of love to reveal and make known his glory; a divine expression of love only for the purpose of love. As creatures, we are finite and limited in vision and understanding of the divine mystery, and will of the divine plan. Nonetheless, we share in that plan through the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus. As expressed in the second reading, 'see what love the Father has for us in that we are called children of God. Yet this is what we are.' We are children of God in and through the person of the Son. We share the divine life through Jesus here and now, only as a preparation of what we will later be. We may be inclined to worry about judgment or purgatory, but our faith affirms that we have been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. This is to say that we are redeemed, set free in the love of God through the death and Resurrection of Jesus. This is our faith and our hope.

What is God's judgment on the world? Jesus. The judgment of God is mercy as revealed in the person and life of Jesus, culminating in his death and Resurrection. This work of redemption defeats the power of evil and reconciles the disorder of our sins. We, by God's doing and not our own, have been made children of God with full inheritance into the life of heaven.

These are the prominent themes of today's feast. The Feast of All Saints is both particular and inclusive. It is particular to those persons who have been named and honored for heroic lives of virtue and holiness. It is inclusive in that it includes all of us who believe in Jesus, hold in faith the hope of heaven, and seek to live our lives rooted in love.

The Feast of All Saints originated in the fourth century and was first known as the Feast of All Martyrs in honor of those who died in the early persecutions of the Church. Only a short time later, the feast was expanded to include all the faithful, both the living and the dead. We honor with love those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, especially those who have shown us the way of faith by exemplary lives. We also honor, in a more personal way, our loved ones who have preceded us in death. The bonds of love that we have held so dearly in their lives do not unravel at their passing, but continue in our love for them and they for us.

Finally, the feast includes all the living who seek to know and follow the truth of Christ in love. This is known as the communion of saints. We are in communion, through faith and love, with all those who have gone before us. Though we cannot see, feel, or touch them, we share an unending bond of love that makes us one. This is the mystical Body of Christ. God intends that all be one, here and here after.

The end of the Church year brings these themes of death and final things. Rather than a mood of sadness and concern, we are inspired and filled with the hope of what we believe. All are called to be saints in that all are called to live lives noticeably marked by love. We have been given the tools and the identity to live out this call through the grace of baptism. Our greatest tool is the Holy Spirit. Knowing ourselves to be loving persons through the words and actions of our lives, despite our failings, confirms that we are in the Holy Spirit. As such, we need not fear death. Painful as it is because of separation, it is the most natural, necessary, and ultimately healing thing we will ever do.

Rooted in hope, this feast day is really about our faith in what we believe. Do you believe what you believe? What do you believe about God? About Jesus? About yourself as a child of God who is loved and valued beyond your ability to know? We are all saints in the eyes of God. It is only ours to discover through lives of self-giving love.

Please use the Book of Life to write the names of your loved ones who have died so we can all pray together for them, even as they pray for us from their heavenly place.

Father John Esper