

WORSHIP NOTES

All Saints Sunday • November 6, 2011

The Season

On this Festival Sunday we celebrate saints throughout the ages – that great cloud of witnesses through whose lives the grace and love of God has shone. Since the 3rd century, All Saints (November 1) has been a celebration of martyred Christians. All Souls (November 2) which follows, has been a remembrance for over a thousand years of all the faithful departed. In the Lutheran Church we have combined both celebrations, and on the first Sunday in November we remember not only the martyrs and saints, but all the people of God who have gone before us in time. We pray today for members and friends of the congregation who have died in the past year, named and unnamed saints, people who have in many ways made the love of God real in our world; saints that lead us into the fullness of life that God intends for us all: “By the witness of the saints you show us the hope of our calling, and strengthen us to run the race set before us . . .” (Proper Preface, All Saints Sunday)

In Word . . .

Jesus begins his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, 7) with the Beatitudes we hear today, connecting the living of these present days with the promises of what will be in the kingdom that is coming. In the sermon that follows, Jesus teaches in clear and certain terms what the kingdom of heaven is all about, and that claiming a place in that kingdom calls for a response here and now. It is a call to a different way of life and to values that will stand the test of time and eternity. As we ponder Jesus’ words, it becomes increasingly clear that happiness or blessedness depends more on the inner person than the outward circumstance, and we consider what it might be to embrace and live out the beatitudes in our culture today. Today we celebrate the lives of all those who have gone before us, some known to the whole church, some know only to those who were in some way touched by their lives. They are people who lived the Beatitudes daily – who shared their possessions, grieved over the tragedies of the world, sought to make the world better, who showed mercy, and who did what they could in the name of peace. Our Gospel asks that we remember these saints, martyrs, and ‘ordinary’ people, not because they were perfect, but because they answered Christ’s call to live in rather extraordinary ways. And for that, Jesus calls them “blessed” . . .

And Song . . .

Traditional (9:00)

“For All the Saints” was first published in 1864 (with three additional verses) and the heading “Saints Day Hymn – A Cloud of Witnesses.” It was written by William How, a beloved Anglican Bishop (Bishop of Wakefield), and it is widely considered his greatest hymn. The text invokes the memory and inspiration of all Christians who have gone before us, encouraging us to remain faithful and hopeful. The purpose of the hymn’s length was to remind us of the long struggle and the final end in glory. Ralph Vaughan Williams’ tune, SINE NOMINE (“without a name”), was written for this text and included in the *English Hymnal* (1906). This majestic tune brings energy and joy to the words, and remains one of Vaughan Williams’ most popular hymn tunes.

Contemporary (10:30)

Today’s distribution song by contemporary composer Scott Soper, “On That Day,” was adapted from the hymn “Shall We Gather at the River,” written by Robert Lowry, a Baptist minister. Lowry’s hymn was written in 1864 in response to a severe epidemic that swept Brooklyn and it was published the following year with five verses and a refrain. It remains one of Lowry’s most popular hymns.

Our sending song, “Give Thanks to God,” is by Timothy Dudley-Smith, an English hymn writer and retired bishop of the Church of England. His collected texts number over 300 and he continues to write six to eight hymns each year. The song we sing today is a prayer of thanksgiving for the witness of the saints, their vision, and the mission we share.