

For All the Saints, November 7, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Revelation 21.1-6a; Psalm 24; John 11.32-44

Prayer

My maternal grandmother died at the end of September. I wasn't able to attend the funeral, but through the wonders of technology, I was able to "virtually" attend. I got to hear the newly consecrated bishop of Edmonton preach at her funeral—he knew her very well. My grandfather, her late husband, was an Anglican priest—they both knew the man who would become the bishop of Edmonton well—he preached at both their funerals. He also got to spend some time with my grandmother before she passed. And her wishes for *her* funeral service were very similar to those for my grandfather who had passed a few years earlier. "Don't make him a saint," she said. The same instructions held for her own funeral: she didn't want to be made into a saint. She wanted a eulogy that described each of them as they were: humans who had strong faith and strove to do the best they could in this challenging life. They weren't saints. My grandmother was sure of that. The bishop preaching at their funerals however, he wasn't so sure.

I'm sure you realize that today we are celebrating All Saints Sunday. The Saints are the focus of our worship today and the inspiration for our readings as well. But, what *is* a saint? Most of us can probably name some fairly easily, but what makes one a saint? And why are we devoting a whole Sunday to them?

Several years ago I watched the mafia-crime drama *The Sopranos*. The main character, Tony Soprano, complained to his therapist about his mother who always referred to her late husband as "a saint". Tony Soprano laments that, while his father was alive, his parents were often at each other's throats. They fought, emotionally and physically, infidelity was common, and they said awful things to one another. But after Tony's father's passing, his mother only refers to her dead husband as "a saint". For Tony Soprano, this is too much, because to him, and to his mother, the word "saint" in this context refers to someone who is perfect. Someone who doesn't make mistakes. Someone who is righteous, holy, without fault. Tony's mother should remember that that isn't true. And that is exactly the definition that my grandmother wanted to avoid for her and my grandfather. They were *not* perfect.

But maybe we shouldn't fault Mrs. Soprano for the way she remembers her late husband. We can probably all think of times when we have done something similar with someone close to us who has passed. We emphasize the positive aspects of their character and our interactions with them, often to the point where we can forget anything bad ever happened at all. That's just one of the ways we deal with grief.

And that process ensures that the dead live on. Their influence does anyway. Those who have passed away can continue to have a remarkable impact on the people who are still alive. Sometimes we are inspired by their lives. Sometimes we are comforted by the relationship that we had. But we can also be encouraged by what we believe has happened to them *after* this life is over. Our shared faith promises that there is something better that awaits us after this life. No matter how strongly we believe in this promise, the promise we caught a glimpse of in our reading from Revelation, there are days when we need encouragement to get through this life we are living here, now, on this earth. And the Saints can help to be a part of that. We know what the end holds—but we need some help to get there.

As an aside, what often ends up happening when we discuss this topic is we are all forced to come face-to-face with our own mortality. We realize that we too will die one day and we can't help wondering what we will be remembered for. How people will think of us after we're gone. Will we be remembered as "saints"? Will our loved ones gloss over our sins and indiscretions and remember us as saintly?

The reality is that not everyone who dies is remembered as a saint. Most people have somewhat checkered pasts. And not many people have a universally positive reception to everything they do. The day after "All Saints Day" is "All Souls Day" where we take the time to remember those who have passed who are perhaps less-stellar examples of humanity. And that's most of us. And most people who die. They will be mourned for and missed, but the legacy they leave behind is not universally positive. And yet, even though most people won't be remembered as saints, they often still leave some kind of a mark on the world they've left behind. And for this reason, we take the time to mourn and to pray for "All Souls" without getting too hung up on whether or not they meet the definition of "saint".

But despite this, I still think of my grandparents as saints. They were loving, kind, generous, humble, and always left you feeling like you were the most important person in the room (even when I was only a little kid). When they died, they each passed with the full confidence of who they were on their way to meet and approached death with little fear. To me, they were saints. The mark they left on my life was saintly and I don't know what more they might have done to further "qualify".

But I know they were not flawless. They had their own faults.

So then, why do we do this? Why do we take this day to remember and recognize the saints? Is it so that we might have more contemporary role models? Are we in need of more people to put on pedestals?

I think that we remember those who have left a mark. Those who have passed whose lived lives *continue* to make an impact on us, on the Church, and in the world. We remember them not because they were flawless—we gloss over their faults so that we can focus on the impact they made. We remember them not *because* of their flaws, but *in spite* of them. Despite their imperfections, they still had a lasting impact.

But our focus remains on *this* life. The ways in which those who are elsewhere continue to influence our lives here. We know something else awaits us, beyond this life. We take some comfort knowing that those who have left (saintly or otherwise) have entered that new reality. And we believe that new reality will be a place where God is at the centre, where there is no more weeping and crying. Where hardship will have passed away. But despite all this, we don't *celebrate* heaven. We celebrate those who did well *while they were here*. Because that is where we are now. And we have the chance to make an impact on people who are here with us. Now.

When Lazarus was raised from the dead, it was a demonstration of Jesus' power over death. Jesus' own resurrection *defeated* death in a way we all will when we too are raised from the dead in bodily form. But Jesus' resurrection (and Lazarus' resurrection) was not a *negation* of this life. Jesus wept over Lazarus—even though Jesus knew better than anyone else what joys awaited him in the next life. AND Jesus alone knew that he was about to bring him back from the dead. THIS life is still important. This life is the only one we have any control over. These lives that we are leading now still have the potential to influence others for generations after we pass. While we are living, we can lead lives that would make Jesus weep when we died.

We know that there are joys that await us in the next life—and that await all the saints. But before we get there, there is still so much for us to do *here*.