

**A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for All Saints Day, Year B
November 1st, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin**

Today we commemorate the saints of the church. Those whose history and the church recognize as outstanding examples of the Christian life. Study of their lives clearly demonstrates why they have been venerated down through the years. Which leads right off the bat to the question: “Are you and I recognizable as Christians?”

Those who chose the lessons for today decided, for whatever reason, to use the passages from the Wisdom of Solomon and from Revelation which are used most often at funerals. And then, the Gospel speaks of the raising of Lazarus.

The connections are obvious. But why lessons about death on All Saints day? Well, I suspect the point is that everyone dies. You and I will one day die, saints die, Lazarus – Jesus’ friend – dies; even Jesus dies.

The ways death is described in scripture could lead us to forget that death is a part of what it means to be human. Scripture tells us that death is the result of the original sin; death is the “last enemy;” death is descent to some nether region away from God’s presence. So says scripture.

But in fact, death would appear to be essential to creation, a necessary part of being a flesh and blood creature.

Will Lazarus die again? Will Mary and Martha face this loss again? What is the purpose of bringing Lazarus back to life?

These are legitimate questions, but they all lead us to see that dying is a part of living and that the story of Lazarus is not finally about raising dead bodies from the grave, but as Jesus says to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” The raising of Lazarus was so that Martha and Mary and no less, you and I, would see the glory of God.

The last enemy to be defeated is death. That had not happened. But so that we could know the glory of God – the glory that he could defeat death – Lazarus was raised from the grave.

Many of the saints we remember today and throughout the year died for belief in a God who could defeat death. They are among the great martyrs of the church. Still others taught about a God who defeated death, and even spoke in front of the rulers of this world to say just that. Think of that in relation to our hesitancy to speak to others about salvation in Jesus.

Many of the early saints, and even many in our own time, spoke freely of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, despite threats against their very lives. Consider some of their stories.

Andrew, the apostle, was crucified by pagans on an x-shaped cross for his beliefs.

Stephen, the first deacon of the church, was stoned to death for blasphemy. A painful and slow death.

Fabian, a bishop of Rome, who was one of the first victims of a general persecution of believers by the emperor Decius in the mid 200’s AD by his willingness to be among the first, he set a courageous example for his followers.

Then there are the martyrs of Japan – a group of six Franciscan friars and 20 of their converts who were crucified at Nagasaki in 1597.

Earlier, in 156 AD., a Bishop by the name of Polycarp was burned at the stake. Before he was set afire, he prayed a powerful prayer, asking that he be allowed to be an acceptable sacrifice.”

Or, Alphege, who eight hundred years later, was slain by the Danes who invaded England, who beat him with the bones of oxen and then put him out of his misery by bashing in his head with an iron axe.

Or Justin, who together with six of his students, was put to death for refusing to renounce their faith.

I could go on and on. History is full of example of Godly Christians – men and women – who chose to stand by their faith in Jesus Christ. Each had the opportunity to renounce their faith, just like Justin. Yet, all chose not to do so. They firmly believed in Jesus, in his resurrection from the dead, and in their own resurrection through his.

My friends, you and I are surrounded by dead people. They are all around us. Oh, they seem to be alive. They walk and they talk. But, inside they are dead. They have no hope of eternal life.

They either do not know about salvation through Jesus, or they have rejected what they have heard.

Just as Jesus called Lazarus to come out of the tomb. You and I have the power through Jesus to call those people out of the tombs in which they are buried -- tombs of ignorance and disbelief.

It all gets back to that original question:

“Are you and I recognizable as Christians?” Would those people be able to see the difference in our lives? Would they see the hope, the courage, the peace that passes all understanding?

Skeptics and nonbelievers would say that there is no resurrection without death. Christians can confidently say there is no death for them without resurrection. That was the firm believe of the saints. It is the faith we hold in our hearts. And it is the faith we need to share to those who have none.