

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

23 Pentecost
November 4, 2007
Fr. bill McGinty

“The Flame of Faith”

Today we celebrate the twin feast of all Saints and All Souls, which come around each year on November 1st and 2nd.

All Saints or “All Hallows” as it was once called, is not a feast for the great saints such as Peter, Paul and the Apostles, nor is it the feast of minor saints, such as Christopher, Agnes or Cecelia. All Saints is the feast for the countless men and women, who served the Gospel and followed the teaching of Jesus down the centuries, but are mostly unknown. In your life you yourself may have encountered a few of them.

All Souls, is our annual day of remembrance for all those in our families, relatives, friends and acquaintances, who we have lost. It is our opportunity to pray for them and to remember them today with affection. As we come ever closer to the end of the church’s calendar year, it seems appropriate to pause and to remember those who we have lost. Our lives, are today so busy, the father, mother, brother, sister, dear friend, slip from our mind, five years, ten years, twenty years go by and yet it seems like yesterday when we took those walks, and had those long chats over cups of coffee and then watched as they passed from this life.

All Saints and All Souls, does something else for us. It unites us in a long unbroken chain back to our origins, the origins of our church, the early Christians, the Apostles and Christ himself. It reminds us of the tradition in which we stand.

In those two thousand years, Christianity has faced many challenges. It was persecuted and almost annihilated in its first 300 years. It survived the hordes of Barbarians in the Dark Ages, when the Roman Empire did not. It faced the full force of the Vikings and Danes for 200 years. It was almost destroyed by the Moslems in the 14th and 15th centuries. It survived destroying itself during the Reformation.

In the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries Science and the Enlightenment caste it aside and said that knowledge and reason would take its place. In the 20th century communism, fascism and the Philosophy of Humanists claimed God and religion were dead.

In 1947 Douglass Hyde an unbeliever, went into a London church and sat and watched a little old lady go up to an Altar, light a candle and kneel and pray before a crucifix of Jesus. He wanted to go up to her and ask her what she was saying. He did not do so, because he was in awe of her dedication and sincerity. As he sat there he realized that this precious faith, exemplified by this woman could never be killed and would never die. He had been a

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life long active Communist but he realized that Communism would die before this old woman's faith would die. That day he left the church and became a Christian.

Each one of us stands in that tradition; it is a tradition of faith. It is the faith that today's readings speak of. We all like to refer to it as "My faith," but really it is not "My faith." We didn't create it or even grow it. It was given to us, as a free gift. We listen to the "Jesus story" from someone else. We were touched by the actions of another Christian. There is a sense in which "the flame of faith", is something that we carry because it is "our" turn.

I once had a High School student in London called Jason Rooney. Jason was bright, intelligent, a good soccer player and prided himself on his Irish roots. One day he announced in my class that he had decided that he didn't believe in God and he had no time for religion.

I asked him, if he had ever been to Ireland and he said that he had many times. I told him the story of Brian Boru. Brian was an Irish King in the 8th century. He was King in the north, when the Danes invaded Ireland. They destroyed Dublin in a great battle, burning all the churches, and hanging every priest, monk and nun. Soon the only place Christians could meet for their Eucharist, were around a rock on the hillside. They would brake bread, drink the wine and pray the prayers.

But as the Danes advanced, the Christians, lost battle after battle, till they were forced into the south western corner of Ireland.

There on the shores of the River Shannon the aging King asked for one last battle. He sent messengers to every corner of Ireland, and men and boys rallied to his banner. It was nearing Easter, when there on the banks of the river, he lights his Easter fire. He told his army: "This is our Easter fire of faith." If it is allowed to go out it will mean the end of Christianity on this Island. Day and night the fire was kept burning. When the great battle came, Brian's army fought with their backs to the Sea, all day and all night. When the battle was over their fire remained lit, and they had destroyed the Army of the Danes, but at great cost. Their great King lay dying as did so many of his brave warriors.

When I had told Jason the story, I said, "Countless generations of Irish have kept that fire of faith burning over the next 1200 years. Do you really want that flame to end with you?"

Of course he didn't, and he went on to do great things with his young Christian life. If you ever go across the sea to Ireland, stop any child, boy or girl and ask them: "Who was Brian Boru?" And they will tell you he was the high King of Ireland who defeated the Danes on the shores of the River Shannon and kept the Easter fire burning.

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Today is not the feast of Brian Boru; today is the feast of all those generations who kept the flame of faith burning.

In today's Gospel Jesus encounters Zacchaeus, a little man, who climbed a tree. Jesus, you notice already knows his name, and he chooses to go and stay at the House of Zacchaeus.

This is one of Luke's stories. Typical of Luke's Gospel, it is a story about the marginalized and someone who is not accepted in polite society. Zacchaeus is a tax collector, and a self confessed sinner. Yet, this is who Jesus goes to and it is to Zacchaeus that Jesus offers salvation.

What is Luke telling us in the story? Is it that the church grows, when we extend the Jesus story to everyone? The feast of All Saints is in a sense the story of Christ's church. The church did not grow because it reached out to the rich and powerful. In fact, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 322, it turned out to be a disaster. Christianity grew when it embraced the poorest of the poor and brought the healing story of Jesus to all. We can think of Francis and his Mendicant monks; and Damien working with the lepers, Teresa working with the poor of Calcutta.

Paul writing to the Thessalonians praises them for their faith, that amid affliction and persecution they stood fast and never ceased to believe.

And that too is the message of Habakkuk "Stand fast do not despair but grow in faith because God does have a plan for you and if you are faithful you will see his vision unfold."

As we celebrate today's twin feast, let us remember those who have gifted us this faith. Not just the great Christians of the Christian Story, but also people who were very, very close to us, the teacher in the 4th grade, the aunt who befriended us in childhood, the father who toiled that we might have a better life than him.

In the 1950's my young brother John and myself often walked with George McCallion and uncle. In November we would visit the city cemetery, and he would take us around all the family graves. We would pause at each and pray.

He would have a story about each one, who they were and what they had done. We learned the family names of people we had never met.

George died in 1965 and his wife in 1984, but he taught us something else too, as young as we were in those days, he taught us that we were not alone in this life; that we belonged to a long, long line of people of faith. "One day you too must die, so that others may live and Christ's Kingdom may come" he said.

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In today's Eucharist let us pray for the George's and the Elizabeth's, the fathers and mothers, your fathers and mothers and all who have passed on to us the precious flame of faith.

Amen+

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