

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. And as we do, we feel pangs of yearning for heaven, for that which is being experienced by those “whose toils are ended, Who through death have unto God ascended” (LSB679:1).

Today is a day of remembering. We remember today those valiant saints “who nobly fought of old” (LSB677:3), the “saints of glorious fame” (LSB676:1); we remember the weary host now arrayed in white who from the great affliction came (LSB676:1), who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14); we remember our loved ones, that great cloud of witnesses surrounding us (Heb. 12:1), who have finished their race and kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7). Yes, our attention is turned heavenward.

We remember thee saints, but we do not pray to them. We pray instead for ourselves that we may follow these “blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys [the Lord has] prepared for those who love [Him]” (Collect for All Saints). Today we pray and we sing our yearning to be “with all the saints in glory” (LSB671:1): “Oh, what their joy and their glory must be ...” (LSB675:1) ... “Oh, what glory, far exceeding all that eye has yet perceived” (LSB671:2), “they have arisen from the cares that keep us still in prison” (LSB679:1).

In this way we distinguish ourselves from Rome, who rejected and condemned our confession regarding the saints, for we, neither on All Saints’ Day or any day, do not pray to the saints in heaven (or even for them). But we do remember them and honor them. Our confessions call upon us to honor them in three ways ... by giving thanks to God for them for their example of faith and works of mercy; by thinking on their faith even in the face of their own faults, so that our faith may be strengthened; like when Peter was forgiven for his denial, for example, we are “are encouraged to believe all the more that [God’s] grace truly superabounds over sin”; and finally by imitating their faith and virtues (Ap. XXI:4-6). As we do these things, our joy is increased for them who enjoy their never-ending joy even as we rejoice now in Christ and look forward to that same joy that lies ahead for us.

And Jesus does call us to rejoice now, even us who have not yet been translated to that place where there are no more tears, even us in the midst of our own dire circumstances. We rejoice, knowing that we are blessed, even though “we are still as in a dungeon living, still oppressed with sorrow and misgivings”; even though we know that “our undertakings are but toil and trouble and heartbreakings” (LSB679:2). We rejoice now, even though we may be reviled or even persecuted for the sake of Jesus. We are glad now at the great reward that lies ahead.

For Christian joy is not mere happiness, although there is surely some

intersection between joy and happiness, and some versions do translate μακάριοι as “happy.” The ESV does not, and I think it’s right not to, for joy flows from the Christian who understands that he is blessed by God in Christ. Divine favor and mercy are ours, and we are glad about that, even though we may not be happy about all the circumstances of our life.

The apostles’, who experienced reviling and persecutions in their day, were surely not happy about that, but in the midst of it, they could still rejoice. When Paul and Silas were in jail (Acts 16:25), they continued to trust in the Lord, and they prayed and sang hymns to God, not a lament, but a sign of their joy in the midst of their troubles. Surely, the faithful of the early church were not happy either about the persecutions and martyrdom that they faced, yet they, too, faced them with faith and hope.

In fact, Jesus says the Christian life is one marked by poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, persecution — things for which He calls us blessed. Jesus warns us to be prepared for trouble (John 16:33); He warns us that we will be hated because of Him (John 15:18); He warns us to expect persecution on account of Him (John 15:20). And we are called upon to endure such hostility as the Lord’s discipline by which we are trained up. It’s painful; it’s not pleasant; we’re not happy about it; but it does yield “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness*” (Heb. 12:11), says the writer to the Hebrews. And St. Paul says, “*we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*” (Rom. 5:3-5).

Rejoice in suffering? One well-known martyr of the faith showed this joy in the face of persecution ... with a bit of humor. In third-century Rome, Christians were subjected to great persecution. In “258, the Emperor Valerian ... issued an edict commanding that all bishops, priests, and deacons should be put to death, and he gave the Imperial treasury power to confiscate all money and possessions from Christians” (Brandon Vogt, “St. Lawrence and the True Treasures of the Church,” wordonfire.org).

Young Lawrence was ordained the archdeacon of Rome and commissioned to protect the Church’s treasure. The Emperor captured the Pope, beheaded him, and gave Lawrence three days to turn over all the riches of the church. Lawrence, however, sold everything and distributed the proceeds to the poor. When called to the emperor to hand over the treasure, Lawrence motioned to the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the suffering people who followed him, and proclaimed: “These are the true treasures of the Church.” He was rewarded by being roasted alive over fire, yet it’s reported that he quipped in the midst: “I’m well done. Turn me over!”

Yes, the true treasures of the church are not found in any earthly wealth. The church's treasures are the blessed, who are the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the reviled and persecuted on account of Jesus. They rejoice and are glad, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, for the kingdom of heaven comes in Jesus.

In Jesus ... for who is the saint? Who is the one accounted holy? Righteous before God? Who is the blessed one? It is he who looks to the One who has overcome the world and its prince. Jesus has destroyed the power of the devil by His cross. Jesus has overcome sin by His sinless life; Jesus has overcome suffering and death for us by His resurrection victory over them. Therefore, Jesus says, "*the one who endures to the end [in the midst of suffering] will be saved*" (Matt. 10:22). Endures how? In faith in Christ; in the grace of his baptism whereby God gave him rebirth and made him His children, in Jesus' word and in the truth.

For we are blessed only by God's Divine favor, only in Christ Jesus, only in Him who became all of these things for us ... in the flesh: poor, afflicted, meek, merciful, pure, peacemaker, persecuted. These beatitudes describe for us the character of Jesus and thus express His mystery, the mystery of His death and resurrection, of the great love of God in His passion for us, and the joy of our salvation in His resurrection. By this mystery, Christ opens the kingdom of heaven to us, and by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, we are given His poverty of spirit, and we receive His righteousness — and though we are persecuted for it, He makes the kingdom of heaven ours. When we participate in the Holy Supper He gives us, we participate in this same mystery, the mystery of a body broken for us, the mystery of blood poured out for us. So that by this Divine work of God alone, we are called blessed, saints, heirs of everlasting life.

Therefore, O saints, blessed are you in Christ Jesus. Rejoice and be glad in your salvation. The kingdom of heaven is yours. Rejoice, lifting up your voices in song with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. Be strengthened by Christ's precious body and blood offered for your blessedness, and live in faith toward Him and in fervent love toward one another, until He calls you to your eternal Blessedness when you will rest from your labors, resting eternally in Christ. Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.