

All Saints Day

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14
<i>Response</i>	Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 24:1BC-2, 3-4AB, 5-6
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 3:1-3
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 5:1-12A

Today on the feast of All Saints, the second reading is not from St. Paul as is often the case. It's from another one of the apostolic letters. It's from the first letter of John. And it's a short passage, but it's a very powerful one, so we're going to look at it today, ask what it means and ask why it's chosen for the feast of All Saints. So in 1 John 3:1-3, we read these words:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.¹

Okay, so couple of brief points about this. First, notice John begins by affirming our identity as children of God. And if you look at John's Gospel—for example, chapter 3—the way a person becomes a child of God is not simply by being created but by being born again or born anew through water and spirit in Baptism. So he's referring here to the divine Sonship, the adoptive divine Sonship, that we receive through grace in the waters of Baptism. So when he's saying:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

...we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

So the second point here is that John is shifting from the present to the future. He's talking here about the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ. So we don't have to wait to become children of God to the second coming. We don't have to wait until the final judgment or the resurrection. We *already are* children of God. But when He comes, we can't even comprehend what we shall be, because when He comes, we shall become like him, because we shall see Him as He is.

Now that is a profound statement that John is making here. In effect, he's talking about two key expectations—two key hopes of the Christian faith. One is for the second coming of Christ at the end of time, but the second is for what we call the beatific vision—the vision of God where we shall see God face to face. We shall see Christ in His glory, in His resurrected body at the end of time. And this is one of the classic texts on the beatific vision in all of the New Testament, because there's a lot of passages in the Old Testament. You might recall where God says over and over again:

...man shall not see me and live.” (Exodus 33:20)

Man shall not look upon the face of God. Think here of Exodus 33 and 34 where Moses asked to see God's face and says, “Sorry, you can't see my face. I'll let you see my backside, but you can't look upon my face and live.” So God will allow some of His glory to pass by Moses, for example, on Mount Sinai. But to see His face is not possible for a human being. And yet, in the new covenant, that's precisely what Jesus is going to promise to His disciples in the Beatitudes, which is the Gospel for the feast of All Saints:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8)

And then here in the reading for today from 1 John, it says:

...that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

So notice here, there are two elements that John is describing—likeness and vision. So he's describing the fact that in the *parousia* at the second coming, we will be changed. We will be made like to God. We will be made holy. And precisely, it is through that vision of God that we shall be transformed.

And you can see in that last verse, he's saying:

...every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

What does that mean? Well, it means that if we are anticipating to see Christ and to become like Him in the resurrection, then we need to prepare now. We need to start living now as if we are children of God who are preparing to see His face in the glory of the resurrection. And that calls for us to cleanse our hearts from sin, as he says he who purifies himself because of the hope he has to one day see the face of God in the beatific vision.

Now, that's just a brief little overview of what John's describing here. But I thought it would be interesting to bring this text to bear, because I think it's one of those passages where I think most people think about going to Heaven. Everybody wants to go to Heaven when they die. Maybe more people might think about the bodily resurrection, although I've learned over the years that that isn't as well understood or well known as one would think from reading the New Testament.

But the vision of God's face...this is so mysterious. It's something that you don't always hear people say, "I can't wait til that day when I see the face of God. I want to see Him as He is. I want to be like Him. I want to be transformed in Him." But that's what John's describing here. This is the eschatological hope of the Christian in 1 John 3 as he says we can't fully comprehend it:

...it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Now that last line “as he is” led to a whole host of debates over the centuries about the nature of the beatific vision—like whether we can see God in His essence, which you’ll see this in the western tradition, or we can only see the energies of God. You’ll see this in some of the eastern writers. And there’s a whole debate about that. I don’t want to get into that debate here, but I do want to make clear that it was this text (and others) that led in the 14th century, Pope Benedict XII to exercise the fullest extent of his papal authority in defining the Church’s doctrine of the beatific vision. Because there were some people at the time who were claiming that when the faithful died, they do not immediately get to see the face of God, but that they would have to wait until the resurrection to actually experience the beatific vision.

And so in his apostolic constitution, *Benedictus Deus*, which was issued in the year 1336, Pope Benedict XII defined the doctrine of the beatific vision and made clear what we as Catholics believe about this. And so I just want to read it to you, because it’s beautiful. It is a little complex. It’s got lengthy Latin sentences, but let me just read it, and then I’ll unpack it and try to just draw a couple of quick points out of it. And this is a perfect example of how what’s taught in the New Testament then becomes clarified and defined by the apostolic tradition and by the living Magisterium of the Church.

So in the 14th century, this is what Pope Benedict XII had to say about the beatific vision. This is our Catholic faith. This is what we believe:

By this Constitution which is to remain in force for ever, we, with apostolic authority, define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints who departed from this world before the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and also of the holy apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins and other faithful who died after receiving the holy baptism of Christ- provided they were not in need of any purification when they died, or will not be in need of any when they die in the future, or else, if they then needed or will need some purification, after they have been purified after death...all these souls, immediately after death and, in the case of those in need of purification, after the purification mentioned above, since the ascension of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ into heaven, already before

they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment, have been, are and will be with Christ in heaven, in the heavenly kingdom and paradise, joined to the company of the holy angels. Since the passion and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and see the divine essence with an intuitive vision and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature...²

That's from Benedict XII. So essentially what he's saying there is, all of the saints in Heaven—whether they're from the old covenant period or the new covenant period—provided that they have gone through the purification necessary, whether this happened during their life or it happened after their death in purgatory...as soon as they die or as soon as the purification in purgatory is finished, they immediately see the essence of God in vision, face to face like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

And that vision of God, that beatific vision—which, by the way, comes from the Latin word for “happy,” *beatus*. The vision of perfect happiness—that is the hope of every Christian. That is the reason we were created, as the *Catechism* teaches...is to enter into the life of the blessed Trinity and to see God face to face.

And so that's what we're celebrating today on the feast of All Saints—all of the holy ones in Heaven who now aren't just with Christ in spirit, but they actually see Him. They see God. They see the essence of God—not through a mirror dimly, but as He is face to face.

² Benedict XII, Apostolic Constitution *Benedictus Deus*, A.D. 1336