

## The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed

<i>First Reading</i>	Wis 3:1-9
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Rom 6:3-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:37-40

Every year on November 2nd, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of All Souls Day. And of course, this comes right on the heels of the Feast of All Saints, where we celebrate all of the blessed who are in heaven enjoying the beatific vision on All Saints Day. All Souls Day is when the Church commemorates and intercedes for all of the souls of the faithful departed who have not yet entered into the Beatific Vision, but who are awaiting the vision of glory while they are in Purgatory. So, it's not always clear to me that people emphasize this enough, but this is a very important feast. People do tend to remember that the month of November is dedicated to remembering those who have gone on before us, the faithful departed, but it also is, in particular, a commemoration where we pray for the dead, where we pray for the dead who have not yet entered into heaven, who have not yet entered into the beatific vision, but who await that entry while in the realm that we know as purgatory?

So let's look at the readings for today, and we'll look at the living tradition and kind of see where the Church gets this notion from and why we continue to intercede for those who have gone before us and why we believe that some of them have not yet entered into heaven, but are in purgatory. So let's begin here with the Gospel reading for today, the Gospel reading is from John 6:37-40, a beautiful section. I love John 6, it is very often tied to the Eucharist, but here the Church picks a passage from John 6 not so much to orient us toward the Eucharist, but to orient us toward the resurrection on the last day. This is what Jesus says. John 6:37-40 reads:

All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”<sup>1</sup>

So pause there. Notice here that what Jesus is describing is known as eschatology, his teaching about the end, about the last things, and his particular focus here in these verses is on the resurrection on or at the last day, meaning the bodily resurrection at the end of time. And it's interesting here that Jesus talks about this in terms of all that the Father has given him, right? And that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him is going to have a share in this eternal life which doesn't just belong to — and this is important. It doesn't just refer to the immortality of the soul but to the resurrection of the body on the last day.

This gospel for today is very much about the hope of bodily resurrection that Jesus holds out for all who have been given him by the Father, number one, and then all who see the Son and believe in him, number 2. So he's talking about those who have come to faith in him. So this is important because the word believe in Greek, *pistis*, can also be translated as faith, to believe or to have faith is the same word in Greek. So when we talk about the faithful departed—you'll hear that language a lot on this day—we're talking about believers in Christ, those who died in the faith, those who died with faith, right? Who are anticipating the hope of our faith, which is the hope of resurrection and eternal life. So just a little note there for the faithful departed. I think it's interesting that the Gospel today also puts that emphasis on belief or on having faith in Christ, and its connection with faith and then participation in the resurrection.

Now with that said, if we go back to the Old Testament reading for today, this is one of the times where I get excited because the Church in the lectionary gives us a

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

reading from a book of the Old Testament that's only in the Catholic Old Testament. Here the reading is from the book of Wisdom. It is a very crucial passage from Wisdom 3 about the eschatology of Judaism at the time of Jesus. So we've seen Jesus' eschatological hope in the Gospel, now we go back to the eschatology of Judaism. How did they understand the afterlife? How did Jews understand what happened to the dead? What happened to the faithful departed? Well, Wisdom 3 is a beautiful description of Jewish belief about the lives and the death of the faithful departed. And this is what it says, Wisdom 3:1-9:

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,  
and no torment will ever touch them.

In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,  
and their departure was thought to be an affliction,  
and their going from us to be their destruction;  
but they are at peace.

For though in the sight of men they were punished,  
their hope is full of immortality.

Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,  
because God tested them and found them worthy of himself;  
like gold in the furnace he tried them,  
and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.

In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,  
and will run like sparks through the stubble.

They will govern nations and rule over peoples,  
and the Lord will reign over them for ever.

Those who trust in him will understand truth,  
and the faithful will abide with him in love,  
because grace and mercy are upon his elect,  
and he watches over his holy ones.

So rich, so beautiful. There's so much to discuss here. I would like to highlight for our purposes in this reflection a few things. Number one, notice he's not describing the fate of all of the dead. He's describing the fate of the righteous. So the souls of the righteous dead, whom he calls the faithful. There it is right there, the language of the faithful departed, the souls of the righteous dead, they are, number one,

they're in the hand of God. Number 2, no torment is going to ever touch them. Number 3, although they appear to have died to the foolish and have suffered destruction, actually, they're going forth from us was one of peace. They are at peace. That's why we'll say often in the Catholic Church, we have a tradition of saying:

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,  
and let perpetual light shine upon them.  
May the souls of all the faithful departed,  
through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Or RIP, you'll see it on the graves, this image of being at peace. Now it says here:

For though in the sight of men they were punished,  
their hope is full of immortality.  
Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,  
because God tested them and found them worthy of himself..

Notice this imagery here:

like gold in the furnace he tried them,  
and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.

Here there's two metaphors being used to describe the disciplining or the purification that these souls undergo. Although they're going to be disciplined for a little while, eventually they'll have the hope of immortality. And the imagery it uses here for this temporary discipline they experience is that of gold being put into a furnace. It's the first one. Why is gold put into a furnace? It's put into a furnace in order to purify it, to cleanse it of its impurities so that it can be fit for whatever use the gold is intended to be used for - jewelry, to make sacred vessels, whatever it might be. That's the first metaphor there. They're not going to undergo torment and destruction, but they will be disciplined for a while. They will have to be purified by the flame of this furnace.

The other image they use also is one of fire, “like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.” Now, in order for God to accept a burnt offering, you don't just lay the animal down or give the animal to God. The animal passes through the flames of the altar and then is consumed by those flames and ascends to God. That's the imagery of a whole burnt offering. It's called an *olah* in the Old Testament or a *holocaust* in Latin. It's the actual translation of a whole burnt offering. So the imagery that its using here for the souls of the righteous is that they're tested by God, they're disciplined by God, they're purified by God, they're burned up like a sacrificial burnt offering. But it's not fire. It's not a purification that leads to destruction and torment, but rather one that leads to entry into God's presence, to being accepted by God so that, verse 7:

In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,  
and will run like sparks through the stubble.  
They will govern nations and rule over peoples,  
and the Lord will reign over them for ever.

This appears to be an eschatological reference to the final Kingdom of God, the final resurrection of the body. You can actually see something similar—and scholars have suggested that Wisdom is alluding to this—in the book of the prophet Daniel, you'll see at the end of the book, Daniel uses similar imagery for the resurrection of the righteous on the last day. When in Daniel 12:2, he says:

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

So this image of them being bright and luminescent is something that will frequently be associated with the glory of the resurrected body. Although it's not explicit in Wisdom, it might be implied here, but what is certainly being described is the Kingdom of God because the Lord is going to reign over them, not just for 100 years or 200 years or 300 years, but forever and ever, and this is what God does to the faithful:

Those who trust in him will understand truth,  
and the faithful will abide with him in love,  
because grace and mercy are upon his elect,  
and he watches over his holy ones.

And the Greek word there for holy one, is *hagios*, and it gets translated in English as His Saints. Holy ones is the literal term, but Saints is how it comes over into English. So this is a very beautiful passage about the hope of the righteous dead, and it's one of the reasons that the Church recognizes that the souls of the faithful departed, even if they're not yet in the beatific vision, even if they're still being purified, even if they have to be disciplined for a little while, eventually they will be accepted by God as a burnt offering, as a sacrifice, as pure gold, precious in His sight. And so the Church prays for those souls who have not yet been purified, who have not yet entered into heavenly glory, but who have died and who have passed on by interceding for them on the Feast of All Souls.

The Psalm for today is, unsurprisingly, Psalm 23, which talks about the Lord's guidance to His house through the valley of the shadow of death and being led by God into His presence, as it ends:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

So a kind of eschatological thrust to the famous Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

And so in closing, I'd like to end with a reflection from the living tradition. St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies on 1st Corinthians, has a passage about prayer for the dead that's very ancient and testifies to the fact that this is not something that the Church came up with in the modern day, or the Middle Ages, or even early antiquity. This is something ancient, it goes back to the early days of the Church. This is what St. John Chrysostom says about prayers for the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring

them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.<sup>2</sup>

So notice there, notice what John does not assume. John does not assume that everybody who's died is already going to heaven and is in glory and has no need of our prayers. No, he actually assumes the opposite. If someone has died, we need to offer our prayers for them, and we also need to recognize that our prayers are efficacious. He gives the image here of Job offering sacrifice. He would get up every morning and offers sacrifice in case any of his sons had sinned. That's the implication. The sacrifices are purificatory. They have a purifying effect for the souls of the dead. Chrysostom's already reflecting that in the early Church, and therefore he's saying, "Let us help [the dead] and commemorate them." Clearly, he presupposes that they are not yet in the glory of the Beatific Vision because they won't need our help when they're in that state.

And that is why the Church has her doctrine on Purgatory, which she describes as follows. Again, this is from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, so this is the official teaching of the Church on Purgatory, which is the presupposition for the very rationale of this Feast of All Souls. The Catechism writes:

This teaching [on purgatory] is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their *sin*." *From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.*

That's CCC 1032. Note this and please note this well. This is very crucial. All Souls Day is not just a day where we remember the dead. It's not just a day where we commemorate them and recall them. We do that and it's very important. All Souls Day is the day where we offer prayers, and the sacrifice of the Mass above all, for the souls of the dead, so that they might be set free from sin and enter into the glory of the Beatific Vision.

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 41.5, cited in CCC 1032.

Notice the quote there from 2 Maccabees. They prayed and “made atonement for the dead that they might be delivered from their sin.” The same thing is presupposed here in the Feast of All Souls. We recognize that not all of the faithful departed were saints. Many of them were sinners, and therefore they need our prayers so that they might pass from the realm in the state of Purgatory into the glory of the Beatific Vision, so that they might be like that gold that was purified for a little while, but then enters into the glory of heaven.