

TODAY'S SAINTS

FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF ALL SAINTS, NOVEMBER 2, 2008, CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST, A SERMON BY THE REV'D DAVID J. ANDERSON

I speak to you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

RECIPE FOR A SAINT

In the spring of this year our family joined a food share program. It is a commitment to buy locally-grown organic vegetables and fruit. We pay a certain weekly amount and we receive in return a portion of a local farmer's produce, augmented by certain other local and sometimes imported organic items. It's been good, but sometimes a learning experience, because our food box comes packed with items which occasionally are not the items we would have normally picked up for ourselves in the grocery store. For example, one of the items we received in the food box back in the spring was Kale. I'm not really sure what to do with Kale. Someone told me that you can freeze it. So that's where it is. It is in the freezer, waiting for some inspiration to come upon us on how those particular greens should be used. Perhaps I will receive some Kale recipes today.

One verse beyond where our Gospel for today ends, Jesus calls his followers, "the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13). Today we might ask the question: what ingredients belong in the recipe for a saint?

I think that it may have been Eugene Peterson, the author of the paraphrased Bible called *The Message*, who has said that saints are the forgiven who know it, act upon it and live by grace without angling for stained-glass-window status. I like that definition. I also like this one. William Stringfellow described saints as "those men and women who relish the event of life as a gift and who realize that the only way to honour such a gift is to give it away."

That, I think, is a great statement: "Life is a gift and the only way to honour such a gift is to give it away."

SAINTS AND CELEBRITIES

We live in a culture that is incredibly enamoured with celebrity. A favourite TV program for some in our house is the programme, "Entertainment Tonight." It is always oh-so-interesting to find out what those celebrities are doing. Is Jamie-Lynn Spears, Brittny's younger teenage sister, actually pregnant with a second child, or is that just a rumour? Who is Brad Pitt married to today? Who is going into rehab? Who should be in rehab? What will Sarah Palin be wearing on election night? There is something about celebrity that is an attraction in our culture.

Life is a gift and the only way to honour such a gift is to give it away. –William Stringfellow

Despite all of the hype, we should realise that celebrities are not all

different than us. As the result of the constant public scrutiny, the ever-present paparazzi, the tabloid journalism, we know all too much about their human frailties. But despite what is known as the “public-life”, celebrities distance themselves from us by their fame, whether it lasts 15 minutes or a lifetime.

Saints are different. Saints are not celebrities.

Sometimes we imagine that Saints are like celebrities, that they are somehow separate from the rest of us. We imagine them living in places far away and we imagine them living long ago. We tend to think that our only experience of Saints is in stained-glass windows. But Saints are not actually that distant from us. Saints are real people that share our common life and open a place in the circle of forgiven sinners.

In the verses that immediately precede our Gospel for today, we read that Jesus has been travelling throughout Galilee, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of God’s reign, curing people of every kind of disease and sickness. Jesus was in the thick of it among the people. Matthew tells us that as the word about Jesus spread, people came to him from near and far, “with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics and that Jesus healed them all.”

Jesus is among the press of all these people and surrounded by the crowds when he arrives at the mountain and begins to teach those who have followed, in the famous sermon in Matthew’s Gospel, that we call the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus begins that sermon by declaring that those who have come seeking God are blessed. Jesus says that the blessed those who are able to stay with him in the thick of things, among the needy, the hungry, the thirsty, the pure of heart and the peacemakers, because that is where he—Jesus—is continually found. The saintly ones remember that the kingdom belongs to the impoverished before God, who hunger for his fullness and weep when his righteousness is denied.

The saints are not celebrities who live behind the walls in their great mansions. Saints are those people who are in thick of it with Jesus.

THIRD-CLASS

Several weeks ago, at the first of two Diocesan services at our Cathedral to invest individuals with the honour that we call the Order of Niagara, Archdeacon Bruce McPetrie of Lincoln, the preacher of the day, educated us about the ways of the stagecoach. For a period of time in the west, before the days when the railroad was able to take you most places, the stagecoach was an important mode of travel. Bruce told us that there were three kinds of tickets that you could purchase for a stagecoach.

The most expensive and the most desirable for many was the “first-class” ticket. First-class would entitle you to your seat in the coach at all times. No matter what, you would always have your seat. Should the coach break down, should there be some sort of problem, you were always guaranteed that you would be able to enjoy the comfort of your seat in the coach.

A “second-class” ticket was, well, second-class. For the most part you were entitled, of course, to your seat, but with a second class ticket in the case of some mishap along the way, should the coach break-down or should the coach get stuck in the mud, you may be asked to exit the coach for some period of time, until the coach is repaired or extricated or otherwise prepared to make its way again. A second-class passenger just might have to get out of their seat for a little while.

And there was a “third-class” ticket. And a third-class ticket was as good as a first-class ticket as long as things were running along, but in the case of a problem not only would a third-class passenger be forced to give up their seat, but the third-class passenger would be forced to change the broken wheel, or to get down in the mud to push while the horses tried to pull the coach through the mud. The third-class passenger was the one who got dirty when required. Only when the coach was freed or repaired, and back on the way was the third-class passenger welcome back in the coach.

Archdeacon McPetrie gave us this little history lesson and said to those who were receiving the Order of Niagara that day, “Congratulations, you are all Third-Class Christians.”

That is true of our own recipient of the Order of Niagara this year, and of those members of our parish who have received that honour in the past. It is true of many, many of you who are members of this community of faith. You are “third-class Christians.” You are not afraid to roll up your sleeves to do a little work. You are not afraid to get involved. You are willing to put some time in. You are willing to lend a hand. You offer your gifts of ministry. You are not just along for the ride. You make a contribution because you know that every contribution is valued and every contribution has a place. You put your money where your mouth is. You are a third-class Christian and we are blessed in our common life because of you.

In our Gospel today, Jesus says that the blessed of God are these third-class kinds of people. Why are they blessed? Because they are where Jesus is among the poor, the hungry, the thirsty and those who long for righteousness and peace.

WE ARE ALL SAINTS BY OUR BAPTISM

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul, on a number of occasions, refers to all of us who have been baptized into Christ as “saints”. In our baptism we have been united with Christ, so we might be expected to be found in our world, where we might expect to find Jesus. In our baptismal covenant, the promises we made at our baptism, we promise among other things, to proclaim by word and example the good news of

God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbour as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Sometimes living out this promise involves getting our hands dirty. Sometimes it involves a sacrifice.

In the next few weeks in church you will be hearing the word, “stewardship.” Yes, it is the time of the year when we are asking people to consider making a financial pledge to the church. But this year we want to talk very seriously about who we are and who we

| *You are not just along for the ride.*

are called to be as baptised persons. We may think about the

saints of the past, those who have gone before us, but we are the saints of today. We need to be living up to that high calling. Both our past and our future are tied up with other saints, but we are already the children of God awaiting the ultimate salvation and satisfaction that both the passage from Matthew’s Gospel and the Book of Revelation envision.

As we come to share in this Eucharist today, we celebrate the past, those who have walked this path before, we celebrate the future and that the future is God’s and that God will bring everything to its fulfillment, but may we come with open ears and open hearts and open hands to embrace all that God has for us and all that God calls us to as his saints in the present. May we be found where Jesus is and may we be blessed.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.