

All Saints. Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12. Nov. 5, 2017.

As you may have noticed, today we are celebrating All Saints, one of the principal feasts of the Christian year. It is a day when we honor all those hallowed souls who have gone before us on the path of blessedness. It is a day when we especially consider our place in the communion of saints, the family of God. Hopefully we draw hope and inspiration from reflecting on our siblings in the faith: Peter, Mary, and Paul; Francis, Thomas, and Teresa. The astonishing claim that we make today is that we are as much a part of God's family as these burning lights of faith whose witness has shown through the centuries. It's a day that takes some guts.

In our texts for this Sunday, two main thoughts stood out to me: a kind of tension between fact and truth; and a strain of universalism running so strongly through sainthood that it might even include us. Now I know that when I talk about a tension between fact and truth, I'm flirting with the world of "alternative facts." But I'm actually okay with that, because I really do think that it's borne out by the bible. The book of Revelation is an extended essay in counter-factual truth telling. The author and original audience of this book were folks living under the heel of the oppressive Roman empire. We are probably talking about a Jewish Christian community, trying to make sense of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70 AD.

Early Christianity was already detaching from the Temple, but its destruction still posed a major challenge to God's sovereignty. These are people who have been ruled for generations by a foreign power, and now the chief symbol of their God lies in ruins. All indications were that the good guys were losing. If the world itself wasn't ending, *a* world certainly was—the world that made sense to Revelation's first audience.

And with Rome's foot on God's people's neck, the author of Revelation pens this confusing, disturbing, and beautiful assertion that contrary to all the accepted facts, God is in control and God's seemingly crushed people are closer to glory than they've ever been. With Jerusalem smoking and the Temple a pile of rubble, Revelation says, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! . . . they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more . . . for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be the shepherd . . . and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." It doesn't match up with the facts on the ground, but it is nevertheless true. And just like those early Christians, when the facts are most dire, we are called to trust more fiercely, to hope more boldly.

In much briefer fashion a similar dynamic is at work in our reading from 1 John, where the author exults that we have been made children of God. And then immediately acknowledges that despite this exalted status, the world doesn't know us. The facts on the ground are a small minority of believers in a heretical branch of Judaism, growing in cities among the poor and artisan classes, and facing occasional outbreaks of vicious repression. But the truth is that they and we are nothing less than the children of God.

And then finally the Beatitudes of course are a whole series of counter-factual truths. The blessed are not the mighty warriors, the superstars, the distinguished scholars, and the rich, but the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. These gentle virtues and seemingly unpleasant states are the flag of God's blessing. The

Beatitudes aren't just surprising or counter-intuitive—they undo what we know about the world in the name of a truth that is deeper and more resilient. The facts on the ground seem to suggest that the successful, the mighty, the powerful must be the ones who are blessed by God. The truth of the beatitudes is that God's holy-making blessing is utterly free of our expectations and is shed about among all kinds of surprising people.

It is shed about even among us. We, too, are among the ones God is making holy through blessing. Us, with our worries about the kids, our imperfect marriages, our giant tax bills, our addictions and weaknesses and friendships and loves and fears. Despite what we know about the world, the facts of our lives, we too are invited to join that great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language who are waving palm branches about among the saints. We are among the saints whose true citizenship is in that coming kingdom of heaven that will be the full redemption of the world. That coming redemption is true, even now when things look so bleak with violence and greed and stupidity ascendant. Even now, especially now, God's kingdom comes and even we play our parts in the long story of God's redemption of the world. Amen.