

### **“For All The Saints” – All Saints Sunday – Nov 4/07**

Did you manage to stuff your pillowcases with candy on Wednesday night? Are you plowing your way through the chocolates and goodies left over? I for one am glad Halloween is over, and the ads for scary movies are finished. I don't mind the evening itself – I usually get some bags of stuff from London Drugs, and I'm on duty to answer the door (Elizabeth isn't keen on doing that part!)

It's not so much that I'm a grumpy old curmudgeon – I enjoy the kids, and have fun with them at the door. But I do get a bit frustrated that our society goes ape over this festival, without having the least clue as to its origins, or its history, or what it really means. I doubt that more than a few people in a hundred could even tell me why it's called Halloween! Most people would be amazed to discover that Halloween – like Mardi Gras – derives its origin from a church festival.

A church festival? Yes! Mardi Gras – “Big Tuesday” – is the blowout celebration on the day before the season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. Since Lent is the church season of repentance and reflection, often accompanied by self-deprivation and fasting, the last day before giving up the “good life” became dedicated to gorging one's self – originally with food and drink, but in many parts of the world it has expanded to lustier indulging as well!

In a similar way, Halloween is the abbreviated name for “All Hallows' Evening” – the night before All Saints Day, the day in the year that the church remembers those who have preceded us in the faith. Those denominations who use the term “saints” to refer only to really special people in the faith also have an “All Souls Day” on November 2 for all the rest, but those of us in the Reformed traditions understand the term “saints” in the New Testament refers to all the faithful, not just a select few. (That there is some cross-over in the traditions is reflected in the names of some churches, such as St. Andrews, St. Giles, St. Aidans, and so forth, but our doctrine still is that the term “saints” refers to all believers.)

Doctrine? Good grief! Why would I be talking about something as stuffy as church doctrine in a sermon?! Well, mostly because our reading from Ephesians talks about doctrine – in fact, the first half of the document talks about little else. The letter to the Ephesians is not really a letter in the sense that we tend to think of letters today, at least if we think of a letter as a personal correspondence between two individuals. Even if we think of a business letter which is much less personal in tone, it is still usually a one-to-one correspondence.

The “letter” to the Ephesians is more of a training manual than a letter – and since none of the early manuscripts include the ascription of “to the saints who are in Ephesus” it is considered by many to be a manual widely disseminated to all the significant churches when it was written. The first three chapters – of which our reading is a portion – outline church doctrine: the essentials of the Christian faith, the basic beliefs of the reconciling action in Christ, the grace of salvation by faith. From the several references to Paul's mission to the Gentiles we can safely assume that there was a need for the blossoming Gentile segment of the new church to learn what was the foundation of the faith. It makes me wonder if the church was being inundated with new Gentile believers who enjoyed going to church but who had no clue as to what the faith was really about. (Sure glad that's not happening today – ha!) That whole first doctrinal section that takes up the first three chapters even concludes with a prayer, “that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

The second half of the document builds upon the doctrinal foundation laid in the first half, and provides a fairly detailed “how-to” manual outlining how these new believers are to live out their faith. Detailed instructions are given about relationships – and since these instructions were given in the social context of a specific time and place they also include those infamous texts of oppression of husbands over wives and slaveowners over slaves – both of which actually miss the essence of the doctrinal points given in the first half!

So, what are those doctrinal points, and how do they relate to us? We see several of those points raised in our short reading from the opening greetings in the “letter.” Several times in that reading we are reminded of the “inheritance” we have obtained in Christ. The early Jewish Christians could claim to have been born into the faith, drawing upon a lineage as a “child of Abraham” and thus a natural inheritor of the grace of God. The Gentiles, however, had no such lineage to call upon, and so could not expect such an inheritance – and here they (and we) are being assured that they are also heirs by faith, that they also can claim the promised “inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people.” Just prior to our reading Paul even explicitly declares that “God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” and that “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace.”

A second key doctrine put forth here is the declaration that these believers, having heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation, “were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” Obviously by the time this document was written and circulated the church had become firmly established as Trinitarian, with Christ elevated to sit at God’s right hand, “above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come” and the Spirit providing access to the Father.

But perhaps the key doctrine put forth here – although not in our short reading but following soon after – is the communion of saints, the unity and oneness of all believers in Christ. “For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one.” This theme of unity in Christ is defined and redefined several times, and even provides the basic appeal for much of the section on detailed instructions on how to live.

It is good for us to pause on this All Saints Sunday and to reflect upon that oneness in Christ proclaimed as a foundational doctrine of the church in Ephesians. That’s easy enough to do as we think warm and kind thoughts about those early saints who formed the church – with great nostalgia we think of them living a lifestyle similar to the one Jesus led, with oil lamps and dusty sandals and Mediterranean foods cooked over open fires. It’s even easy enough to feel one with the saints of the Reformation period, drawing upon an ethnic kinship with those who were sacrificing based upon principles to redefine the church as we know it. It’s easy too to feel one with the pioneer missionaries – many with familiar ethnic ties – who established churches here in Canada, some of which we remember and some of which we have worshiped in.

But it’s not as easy to feel one with today’s Gentiles, is it? We have a great need to hear the message in Ephesians that the Gentiles of today – those who we think were not born into the faith the way we were – are our adopted sisters and brothers in Christ. The obvious ones come readily to mind – those who are from a different ethnic background, relatively recent newcomers not only to Canada but to the Christian faith. We need to hear that they are properly included – with us – as “all the saints.” But there are those Gentiles of today who are less obvious – those even already in the church who bring in a new perspective on faith, who we feel don’t understand what the church is all about; we need to be reminded that they too have been adopted by Christ’s blood and share the inheritance of redemption with God along with us. Even less obvious, perhaps, and perhaps even more difficult, is that we need to believe, to accept, that we are also included among “all the saints.”

We don’t need to agree with our Christian sisters and brothers on every point of how the faith is lived out. We are both free to enter into dialogue as to what it all means and also encouraged to do so. But we are expected, by Paul and by Christ, to “bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Let there be thanksgiving that we are in this faith together. Let us as Paul enjoins, “be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”