

A Church United in Christ through Faith

This past year I lost a cousin. Not one that I was particularly close to—I didn't really know how to be because he was severely handicapped and so I didn't really know how to connect with him. I didn't really know, but I was also too busy running around and playing and doing the fun stuff—the things that he couldn't do.

Now that he's gone, I regret much of that. For I know he was more caring than your average person and passionate about Celtic music and tractors. But on this day, I rejoice that he was also passionate about church. His parents had always brought him to church and there he found love and acceptance and people to chat with and work to do, and there he knew God's grace. There he was sealed in His baptism and sustained by the Word, held close by Christ amidst His many trials in life.

So on this day, in this year especially, he's the one in the forefront of my mind. He's the one that I'm most looking forward to reuniting with at the moment. He's the saint that I am thankful for and hope to emulate in many ways with my life.

I'm sure today, as we think of those Christians who have gone before us, you've got some that stick out. Some that nourished your life and your faith, some that you'd give almost anything to be around again. Many that you miss greatly.

But on this day, we give thanks to God for them in hopeful anticipation. The pictures of the Church painted in our readings give us such wonderful reasons to live this life with the sure knowledge that we will be united with those saints who have gone before, reunited with them in paradise. The sermon for today is interspersed with the hymn "For all the saints who from their labours rest" so as you sing and listen, may you be comforted by the Church universal which

continues to connect you with all the Christians who have ever existed, and also comforted by the sure hope of the resurrection of the dead, which will be our lot in life everlasting.

Let us sing verses 1 and 2.

1. For all the saints who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confess,
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
2. Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might;
Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;
Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thank God for His saints. On this day and everyday, thanks be to God for the men and women who have gone before us in the faith and paved the way for you and me.

Through their lives of faith, of sin and repentance, of failure and victory, they leave us footsteps to follow in. You mothers and fathers in the faith leave us a picture of what it looks like to live this Christian life, to love your neighbour and serve strangers and above all to trust in God. We have heard stories of what it means to persevere through trials, trusting God against all reason, being sustained by morsels of food and in the harshest of conditions. We have seen them be peacemakers, we have heard of them seeking righteousness in their place and time, and we know that as many as we hear of, there are many more who simply lived their days, meek and lowly in spirit, trusting in the death and resurrection of their Lord to carry them through each minute.

Thank God for the saints who have gone before for it was their faithfulness to the Gospel which carried it through the ages, through all persecution for their Lord's sake, that brought it to your ears, to your life.

Thanks be to God for the saints' faithfulness to Him; thanks be to God for His faithfulness to His saints.

Throughout their days Satan buffeted against their lives, trying to steal from them their breath and their faith alike. The world shook below them in an attempt to steal their balance and push them over into the nothingness of unbelief. Their own sinful flesh fought to drag them every which way to satisfy each sinful craving. But despite all that would be thrown against them, Christ, their Lord and saviour whom they worshipped and adored, whom they placed their trust in, He proved faithful. He sealed them so that, even amidst the attacks of evil and the wrath of God on sin, they would endure by His grace and power.

He was the Rock on which they stood, solid amidst storms of doubt and drought. He was a fortress from temptation's whipping winds and Satan's billowing storms. His Word was the might by which Satan's lies were dissolved and their own conscience's attacks were destroyed. Christ the Lord was a faithful captain, giving light to their lives, providing for their needs as they arose and leading them to the promised land, the paradise of the blest. He was faithful to those whom He had given faith. He was faithful in their and beyond their dying breath. Now their souls exist in His presence. Now they are the blessed, seeing this blessedness with their own eyes. And in that blessed perfection, they await the culmination of the Church, when it shall all be united, each member in body and soul. One day we will all be together around our Lord. But we are not together. Not in time and space. Not yet.

Let us sing verses 3, 4, and 5.

3. Oh, may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old
And win with them the victor's crown of gold.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
4. O blest communion, fellowship divine,
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

5. And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

You and I remain the 144000, the army row on row, soldiers heeding the call of battle.

You and I are the sealed, protected from the tempests of the world but fighting in the midst of the storms.

We are called to be the children of God, the blessed. Though the world does not know us as such, it isn't because we are not God's Sons and Daughters, but simply because we have not been revealed as such.

We are the hidden sons and daughters of God, and we live as His own. We are the peacemakers, striving to make peace among this creation amidst dissolving relationships. We risk having our head bit off by neighbours in an attempt to reconcile brother to brother. And we are the meek, sitting silently while others criticize us: "I thought you were a Christian—why would you do this to me" they say. Our response is, "yes, I am a Christian. And I am so because I am a sinner bought by Christ. For my sin I am truly sorry." And we, the blessed, will be criticized. We will be mocked and ignored. For that is what it means to be a child of God, to be the blessed, to be one with Christ our Lord, who knew ridicule and suffering. In Him we live, faithful true and bold.

And as much as we strive to live this life of the beatitudes, we live forgiven. Faithfully, truly, and boldly forgiven.

In your baptism you were sealed with the sign of the cross on your head and on your heart, to mark you as one of the redeemed. That dreadful death of Christ has stolen you from the hands of the evil one and so you have been protected from the storms of this world by the one who redeemed you, but you are also protected from the storms within yourself, which would

accuse you and doubt you and praise you and focus on you. But this seal points you to Christ, who has redeemed you and given you value and a future. But it was Christ who did this and not you. And so, to remind us of Him and to focus on Him and to rejoice in Him, we come to be sealed over and over again. We may make the sign of the cross in the invocation; we partake in the results of the cross in His body and blood. His Word, read, heard, preached, makes the seal of the cross over you time and time again in order that you may remain His child, that you may be purified by Him as He is pure, that you may don His robes of righteousness, even now, and go with Him into the World where you live as His beloved child, hungry for righteousness and mercy, meek and peacemaking, mournful over sin and more than willing to suffer for the sake of the one who suffered for and sealed you.

So we soldier on in the unity of the Church, of all those who have been sealed today for the sake of a tomorrow in paradise. We all live in Christ our Lord, loving those around us despite the rejection and sorrow we endure.

You and I are one with those who have gone before, whose lives are seen as perfect because their sinful flesh has been done away with; our lives, here and now, are perfect even if the rest of the world cannot see it—even if we cannot see it. We are united in the life of Christ and He perfects our days. So just as our mothers and fathers in Christ loved their neighbours, so do we. As our God-parents strove to proclaim Christ's Gospel to us and those around us, so do we. They in their lives were the perfect Children of God, and so are you and I. They endured until the end, and so must we.

And yet we yearn for this battle to be over. Enduring the attacks all around us is tiring, and if we were left on our own, we would falter and fail. Even with the love of God given to us,

if we were left to our own devices to cherish our spouse and raise our children and serve our bosses and our students and our patients, we would crash and burn.

But you have been forgiven and empowered in the past to live in Christ and the same happens in His Gospel each time you hear it proclaimed. You are not left on your own to fight, to endure, to remain perfect. You are perfected by He who is perfection.

And to stir you on, to get you up tomorrow and to entrust your life into the hands which sealed you, we hear today the chorus of His song of victory, of the salvation He has won for you. We sing today “salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.” We sing it and we believe it because the Lamb, our Lord has promised to faithfully fight for us until the day we join the saints who have gone before us. Now looking forward to that reunion, let us sing verses 6 and 7

6. The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon, to faithful warriors cometh rest.
Sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

7. But, lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of Glory passes on His way.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

This past year there are many saints who have gone before us. They have left our ranks in the church militant, the Church fighting the good fight and enduring the trials of life, and they have joined with the rank of those in rest, in paradise the blest, the church triumphant.

But we mourn, for we miss them. We are left to endure the results of humanity’s sin as we suffer such a loss, but we also rejoice for God has been faithful to them. The seal which He placed on them in baptism and renewed in them time after time, that seal has proven true—they were His own and now they live among Him in paradise. He has been faithful to our mothers and fathers, our brothers and sisters, our cousins, our friends, and strangers alike. One day, we too,

will be united with them, but even today, we are. We are united with them in our prayers as we pray for Christ's righteousness to come to us and His judgment on evil, as we pray He turn the sinners to Him in repentance. We are united with them in the feast that we partake in, albeit they enjoy by sight what we receive here by faith. And we are united in our perfection in Christ, all His sons and daughters.

This will one day be made sight, when we are resurrected from the dead, our bodies and souls reunited to be among the uncountable saints. In that time, we will not be the blessed by faith but we, who were in Christ meek, merciful, peaceful, and persecuted will know His blessings by sight. We shall not hunger nor thirst for righteousness because that shall be all that exist; we shall have no more reasons to mourn and weep. We will be protected from the scorching Sun and we will be eternally shepherded by the lamb who was slain on your behalf. This we hope for with all Christians around the globe, and so we sing in verse 8

8. From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Alleluia! Alleluia!

In that day, we will join with all saints from all times and places, in the unending hymns of praise we raise in the new heaven and the new earth.

But until that day we pray that the one who died for us and sealed us in His righteousness would keep us through all trials and in fact bring many more into His fold, that the number in heaven would be that much more uncountable. May we all, today by faith, but then by sight, know the perfection and love and everlasting blessedness which He has won for us.

Amen.