



SUNDAY OF ALL SAINTS JUNE 19

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 10:32-33; 37-38; 19:27-30

[Encouragement to Fearless Witness]

The Lord said to his disciples, "Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny him before my Father who is in heaven. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Then Peter said in reply, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many that are first will be last, and the last first."

THE SERMON

The gospel reading relates to the theme of apostleship, the theme of the Church's mission in the world. Christ delivers not only to the apostles, but to all of us, to each one of us individually, a clear message. As Saint John Chrysostom remarks, "He is not here addressing his original disciples only but every one of us who follows after his disciples in accord with their witness to him." Christ asks that we love Him beyond all else, even beyond



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our close relationships with family and friends. Like the Saints, let us strive to make Christ our *everything*. This message might be difficult to process when we hear it, especially for the first time. What Christ is asking may challenge our belief system about what we know of life and family. It may seem impossible to put into practice. "But with God *all* things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

The journey in the faith is not without challenges. The apostles certainly did not have it easy, and we are all called to follow in their footsteps. One way for us to approach this particularly difficult challenge, that the Gospel sets out for us, is to better understand *what* Christ is asking, and *why* He is asking this of us. Many of us have already faced difficulties in life. Some have come to experience sorrow, pain, and loss. The joy of Christ, the joy of living in the Spirit of Christ, is a reality open to each of us. The joy of Christ is not only relevant when we pass on from this life. It applies right now, in the here and now. This is what sustains us, no matter the difficulty or challenge we may be called to deal with in life, because Christ is the source of joy.

Christ offers us unconditional love, and limitless freedom. However, for us to fully integrate Christ's love and freedom into our lives, we need to try to embrace Him without conditions, without stipulations, without prerequisites. This is the key to understanding the Gospel reading. Christ is the One Who sacrificed Himself for *us*. Yet, He does not expect a similar sacrifice in return from us. And for us to live through His selfless sacrifice, let us try to embrace Him fully, not part of the way, not some of the way, not sometimes. Let us try to embrace Him always. The faith and confidence we are called to place in Him for all things, simply calls us to give what we can to God.

So, when we hear the call to abandon father and mother and follow Him, we are invited to focus not on what we give up, but on what we *gain*, on what those around us *gain*, on what even father and mother stand to *gain*. We are called to choose the light over the darkness, life instead of death, freedom rather than slavery. This is the choice before us. The freedom that God grants us means that we are the ones who choose whether to follow Him or not. This decision may sometimes be difficult. There will undoubtedly be obstacles, and it might seem as though the choice before us is somehow different, that somehow we could continue to imagine God in a way that conforms to our self-serving desires. However, whatever challenges may exist in integrating Christ into our lives, as well as His commandment to love in our lives, it is Christ Himself, in His Spirit, Who guides us. He shows us the way, and gives us strength to help us overcome our weaknesses. God, Himself helps us work through our temptations.

We are called to make the effort to open the door to Christ, greet Him, let Him in, get to know Him, live with Him, and live in Him. At every Divine Liturgy, we recite the Lord's prayer and ask that "*Thy* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The goal is to become instruments of God's will, which means becoming instruments of His abundant love and precious freedom. This is the path to full communion with God. This is the path

to Sainthood. This is why this particular Gospel reading is so closely connected to the Feast of All Saints. On the Sunday of All Saints, the Church commemorates all the women and men who have attained saintliness, whether known or unknown. As the faithful throughout the world continue to grow in their faith, celebrating All Saints is necessarily an open-ended affair, including contemporary and future saints.

Sometimes, we might feel like the Saints are so distant from us. We perceive them to be our Holy Church's hall of fame of the greatest Christians who ever lived, forgetting that they too were Christians like us who grew to love God. Believe it or not, many of our beloved Saints were some of the greatest sinners at some point in their lives. We can think of the *first* saint, the Thief on the Cross (also known as the Good Thief). Although he spent his life leading a life of crime, at the hour of his death, he confessed his sins on the cross. He prayed, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." The Lord told him, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." Let us reflect on the mercy of God in this exchange on the Cross. The Thief asked for a life of crime to be forgiven at the end of his life, and the Lord assured him that he would enter Paradise with Him in the Holy Resurrection. Truly, as King David says in the Psalms, "God is wonderful among his Saints!" God is truly wonderful to His Saints, and to us, the saints of God's Church on earth. We too only need to simply turn to God, and ask Him from our hearts to remember us in His Kingdom.

This Good Thief reminds us that the Saints are not those who lived perfect lives; they were sinners just like all of us. The Saints had their faults, just like you and me, but the Saints are those who acknowledge and love the Lord Jesus Christ, ask for His mercy, and receive His grace. Likewise, we too can not only become saints, but we are *called* to become saints. No matter our past, no matter what we have done, the Physician Jesus Christ is waiting for us to heal us, and lift us up with Him, just like the Holy Thief. The Saints are those who renounce their old lives, take up their cross, and follow our Lord Jesus Christ, finding joy in their Savior who waits with open arms for us to return to Him. The Saints are an example of what you and I can become if we are open and willing for the Lord to come into our hearts, and heal what is broken. The Saints are our role models; we are called to imitate them, as they imitated Christ. They showed us that we do not have to be perfect, we do not have to be resigned to lives of discontent. The Peace of God, Jesus Christ, can fill us with His peace, and make us saints if we follow Him, regardless of our shortcomings.

On the Feast of All Saints, we therefore celebrate our own God-given potential to be perfected in glorifying God with our thoughts, words, and deeds. It is possible. All the saints serve as examples of persons who achieved sainthood through trials and tribulations, exercised patience and humility, and practiced selfless love in service to others. They were not born saints. They were not without sin. They were not perfect. They were, however, able to reach sainthood, and now they stand ready to intercede before God in favor of our own salvation. They intercede on our behalf while we continue engaging in our struggle toward holiness. Let us pray to the Lord for guidance and strength as we

attempt to reach the choir of the Saints where God Himself patiently and lovingly waits for each and every one of us.

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