

Sermon *Peter My Favorite Saint*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 11.2.25

Daniel 7:1-3,15-18
Psalm 149
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

Happy All Saints Sunday! This can be a strange day for the Episcopal Church. We are the middle way between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Why does that make today strange? It's because we're in the middle when it comes to our recognition and celebration of the saints. In the Roman tradition, saints are revered and prayed to. In the protestant tradition, saints are seen as people who we can act like, and be inspired by, but our prayers go to God through Christ. Period.

This distinction was highlighted when my son was looking at going to Bishop's School in La Jolla (CA) or Mater Dei in San Diego. Bishop's is an Episcopal High School. Mater Dei is Roman Catholic. When we were at Mater Dei for a tour, at 2 pm, a bell rang, the students stood up, and were led in a daily prayer to St. Mary (the Mater Dei – "mother of God" in Latin). Once the prayer was over, I leaned over to Ethan and said, "We have One Advocate and Mediator; His name is Christ Jesus, to Him alone do we pray." It was a line straight out of the Reformation and, frankly, it surprised me to say it. I love St. Mary. She's great. She is owed a tremendous amount of respect and honor. She was the first saint. She was the first evangelist. She is the Queen of the Saints. She said, "*Let it be with me according to your word,*" and it changed the world, and it changed my life. She's amazing.

Do I pray to her? I follow my tradition and pray to the One Mediator and Advocate. But, if you pray to Mary, that's great. Please do not let anyone tell you different.

That experience at Mater Dei taught me something about myself. It also highlights what can be weird for the Episcopal Church on All Saints Sunday. We, as a body of believers, believe in the saints – both on earth and in heaven. But we tend to shy away from praying directly to the saints.

And then there's Peter...

For as long as I can remember learning about the disciples, Peter has always caught my attention. Later in life, when I could really start to understand the Bible and myself and sin and God's redemption, Peter stood out even more starkly. The Peter of the Gospels is flaky, misguided, self-serving, rash, and doesn't really think things through. Worse yet, he denied Jesus. After the resurrection, he went back to his old way of life and went fishing (and the rest of the disciples followed him). But that's not the full picture of Peter. The Peter of the New Testament is full of courage, wisdom and power. He set aside all that he cherished in the faith of his youth and opened The Way to the gentiles. He was the first to baptize a non-Jewish family and he did so out of faith and love. Peter in the New Testament is a leader of leaders. Even his shadow healed people as he walked by. Peter is truly the one on which the Church is built.

Seeing the two Peters – of the Gospel and of the New Testament – it made me wonder what happened between the Gospel and the New Testament. The answer is the undeserved power of Grace. God manifested in Peter. He took it, embraced his power and authority in Christ, and began the movement which has been gaining speed ever since. As you can tell, Peter is my favorite (despite how much I love St. Mary).

When I was ordained, I had an experience that was not in my body but was somewhere else. I was surrounded by the Great Cloud of Witnesses that Scripture talks about. Peter was beside me. I can't tell you so much what he looks like but I know his presence. If someone you live with and love walks into the room, and you don't see them, you still know who they are. Likewise with Peter and me. If his presence walked into the room while I am writing this, I'd know it was him. His presence was with me when I was in the sea of the Cloud of Witnesses. It was an uncountable number of people who were ordained before me. For a brief moment, I was the newest ordained person in the world and God's Kingdom. Peter welcomed me. He's been guiding me ever since. Not like Jesus. Jesus is a much deeper and wider and more amazing presence and guiding/forgiving/sanctifying power in my life. When his presence is in the room, my knees hit the floor. Peter is different. Not a friend, but, like a boss; a manager; a leader and guide. He's been there and done that. In my first two parishes after ordination, I was sent to places that had been in a lot of trouble. I helped guide them back into health. At some of the most difficult points along the path to parochial health, Peter's presence was with me.

A couple of years ago, we had a parishioner at All Angels who was doing some work outside on the campus. He showed up in my office and said he set his sunglasses down somewhere and couldn't find them and that if I found them to hold onto them. As he was leaving, I asked Peter if he knew. Suddenly, I had an image of our fountain pump in my head. I went out there and sure enough there was a pair of sunglasses sitting on top. The parishioner had not left yet so I brought them to him. Some of you may have been raised in a tradition to ask St. Anthony to find you lost things. That's fine; my connection is with Peter.

Before I go on further, I'd like to point out that often Peter will have me search for things. He won't just immediately tell me where something is. But, in this case, he made it easy for me.

In the reading from the Letter of James where he instructs those who are sick to call the leaders of the church and to be prayed for, the author references the prophet Elijah. He said, "Look, Elijah was a guy just like you and me. But you want to talk about the prayer of the righteous, Elijah prayed that it wouldn't rain and it didn't rain for three and a half years! Then, he prayed for it to rain and God's abundance grew." The author then invited us to imagine what we can do with the power of prayer in our lives.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus said, "Give to anyone who begs from you." This is a particularly difficult passage for Christians. It's one of the most common questions I get – "Should I give money to the guy on the street corner with a sign?" If you read Jesus's words as they are, it would seem that the answer is yes, you should give money to those who ask. But, I believe there is more to it than that.

Let me ask you a question: when you ask something from God, does God give it to you just as you asked? Or, does God give you not what you asked for but what you need? I was hoping you'd say God always gives you what you ask for because I'd like to find out what type of prayer you are doing. But the answer is that God gives what we need; not what we ask every time.

With the guy on the street corner, let's say 59th and Cortez. He's asking for money. Jesus said: give to all who ask. But he didn't say: Give people what they ask of you. The verb, to give, is the important piece here. You are to *give* to them. Give them your attention. Acknowledge them; if you feel comfortable. Let them know that they are seen. You can give them a prayer. Pray to God on their behalf and in intercession for their family. Imagine if that guy on 59th and Cortez received 100 prayers that day. Or maybe 200 prayers. Prayer changes things. That guy, his family, his support system, his friends, will be affected by prayer. He's asking for loose change; you give him a prayer, many prayers, that can affect his life.

Peter said to the man who asked him for money, as he and John were walking to the temple, "Silver and gold I do not have; what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk." And he did. He stood, he leapt for joy. He ran around. He was constantly giving thanks to God. That's what prayer can do. Elijah did it and it didn't rain for over three years. Peter and Elijah and even Mary are people like you and me. Just normal, everyday people. But, with prayer, with faith, with strength that comes from Grace, with imagination of what God's kingdom can do on earth, they followed God and the world changed for the better.

And so, in our sense of how we are as the Episcopal Church with both the middle way of Roman Catholicism and with Protestantism, we know that we pray to Christ and we pray to Christ alone. We know that the Holy Spirit is the one who brings us life and peace.

But then there's this whole sense of this other side of humanity and that they're with us – the saints – and that this time of year they seem to be especially close to us. And so if you know of that presence, of the presence of a saint, or of a loved one that you see no longer but get a feeling that the person is around you, giving you love, and peace and direction; if you know of what it means to have a guide, then on this All Saints Sunday, you know that you're never alone. You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And that is why this day is a day of rejoicing and of gladness. Happy All Saints Day.