

All Saints' Day
 Mt 5.1-12
 1 November 2009
 Fr. Patrick Allen

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Good Morning!

I realize, of course, that it is not our custom to begin sermons with such a chummy greeting, and in fact I can't stand that sort of thing myself. But I'm about to spend a few minutes really depressing you, so I thought I'd ease into it with a little sunniness.

But so much for that – on to the depression. And of course we could start right there – with the depression, or the recession, or the whatever we're calling it. Unemployment in the United States is as of September is 9.8% and climbing. Here in South Carolina the unemployment is rate is 11.6%. I know the statistics, but some of you know the reality, and the gnawing anxiety, of joblessness or of its looming possibility.

Here's another statistic, of a different sort, that gnaws at me. Here in America, something north of 80% of unborn children diagnosed with Downs Syndrome are aborted. I mention that not to raise the issue of abortion *per se* – though I don't mind doing that, nor to minimize the difficulties in caring for a special needs child – but because it should lead us at the very least to ask, what sort of a society have become? What has happened to us that we cannot find the resources in our hearts and in our pocketbooks to welcome and care for these differently-abled neighbors of ours and to support their parents in their vocation?

If we look abroad for a moment, Freedom House, an international organization monitoring issues related to religious liberty, recently released a report showing that it is now possible to walk from the west coast of Africa all the way to the east coast of China and never once set foot in a country that practices what might plausibly be called religious freedom.

To bring us right back to these very pews this morning, we are all too aware of the problems, to put it mildly, in our own Episcopal Church. We can avoid the controversial issues and simply frame the matter in cold, non-partisan statistics. As our Bishop reminded us last Saturday, in the space of 40 years, our membership has decreased by 44%, and the church's influence greatly in advance of that.

Have I mentioned swine flu?

In Friday's *Wall Street Journal*, Peggy Noonan had a column in which she said, "The biggest threat to America right now is not government spending, huge deficits, foreign ownership of our debt, world terrorism, two wars, potential epidemics or nuts with nukes. The biggest long-term threat is that people are becoming and have become disheartened, [and] that this condition is reaching critical mass."

It would be easy to dismiss her as a conservative crank in the midst a liberal political ascendancy, except that I happen to remember another column she wrote during the previous administration, before things had tuned so completely sour for it, in which she said, there is a "general and amorphous sense that things are broken and tough history is coming."

I don't disagree with that assessment, and I believe it's the sense of my generation generally. Although I am also aware that, as current song by the group Wilco has it, "every generation thinks it's the worst/thinks it's the end of the world."

But I would add this observation to Ms. Noonan's assessment: Ever since our first parents fell, things are broken, not the way they are supposed to be; it has always been "tough history." As St. Paul said, "the whole creation groans."

So, at a time like this, what do we need? To whom do we look?

In 2002, at the nadir of some very tough history in the Catholic Church – the priestly abuse scandals, a priest named Lorenzo Albacete made a remark that points us in the right direction. He said,

"If, in addition to all the terrible things we have learned, it was revealed tomorrow that the Pope had a harem, that all the cardinals had made money on Enron stock and were involved in Internet porn, then the situation of the Church today would be similar to the situation of the Church in the late twelfth century when Francis of Assisi first kissed a leper."

What Monsignor Albacete meant by that was simply, again, that history is always tough, or about to be, and the Church is only – but ever – renewed by her saints, which is to say, by sinners who have heard and responded to the message of God's love in Christ, and have staked their all, their fortunes, their reputations, their very lives, on the promise of that message, even and especially in the midst of "tough history."

Which I hope brings us out of the gloom and into the light. Today is the Feast of All Saints, a day set aside in the Church for us to contemplate and rejoice in the lives and witness of those Christians whom God has raised up and through whom the light of the Gospel has shown with crucial clarity for particular places at particular times. So that, as the collect we have prayed together this morning has it, we might have "grace to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living."

So the goal is not just to be equipped to endure tough history, but actually to become God's redemptive agents, his fellow workers, in the midst of that tough history; by words and actions to shine the light of the Gospel in the world's dark places – even in our own neighborhoods and in our own families. The object of this day is not just to venerate those blessed ones, those saints "who from their labors rest," but actually to be transformed ourselves into their image, which is the image of Christ, for one another and for the sake of the world.

So, then, what is it that the Saints do? We could put it this way: they learn to fly backwards.

When I say that, I have in mind a movie of some years ago about the first attempts to break the sound barrier. One of the problems the pilots and aeronautical engineers encountered was that as they approached Mach 1, the pilots lost control of their planes because the instruments stopped working properly, which is why a good many of those test pilots trying to break the sound barrier died in the attempt.

In the climactic scene of the movie, the Chuck Yeager character figures out what to do. Just as his plane is about disintegrate or to spin out of control as he approaches the speed of sound, he discovers that the controls actually have begun to work backward. Because of the shock waves that form around the plane's control surfaces at that speed, they have the opposite of their normal effect. Pushing the stick forward actually brought the nose of the aircraft up. He courageously begins to the opposite of everything he had learned about flying. And doing so – in essence, flying backward – he was able to burst through the sound barrier and fly faster than any one ever had.

Now, that's what happened in the movie. General Yeager has said that in actuality it didn't work quite like that. But it works for my sermon, and I'm going with it.

Our Gospel lesson this morning and each All Saints' Day is this beginning portion of our Lord's "Sermon on the Mount," the "Beatitudes," in which Jesus paints for us a portrait of his blessed ones, those he says are getting it right, those who are breaking through. And as we hear these descriptions, we see that the blessed ones of our Lord are, if you'll indulge my metaphor, flying backward. They have found that in Christ the controls work backward.

The blessed, Jesus says, are not the ones we expect. It's not the rich, the powerful, the secure. Rather, they are the ones who have turned their backs on the quest for wealth, power, and security. They are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted. It's a complete reversal of the way things normally work. Leo Durocher said, "Nice guys finish last." But Jesus said, "the meek will inherit the earth; the pure in heart will see God."

But it's a rough world, and history is tough. How can we proclaim the Beatitudes with a straight face? Those who mourn are often uncomforted. Martin Luther King, Jr. hungered for righteousness and went to his grave unsatisfied.

But Jesus is not offering us a philosophical analysis of the world here. Rather, the Beatitudes – and the lives of those saints whom they describe – are an announcement. This is a new reality that is coming to be, not a general truth of life as it is. This redemptive history entering in to and subverting tough history. Above all, it is a Gospel; it is Good News. And the Saints are the sure and certain sign of that Good News, that new and growing reality, that Coming Kingdom. As Fr. George Rutler has said, the atheist can deny God, but he must ignore the saints.

And the Good News is this: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the decisive in-breaking of that other, better world – that other, better kingdom – into this world. It's an invasion, and the beachhead is already established, and this world is being transformed – transformed in and through the Church, in and through her saints.

And the Saints – the Blessed Ones of the Beatitudes – are those who have already been conquered. They are the soldiers of this world who have surrendered to the King of the Next, and are living by the rules of that Coming Kingdom, which looks a lot like flying backwards in the darkness of this present age.

And the Saints call us to follow them, to stake our all – in every circumstance, in the midst of tough history – to stake our all on the promise of Christ and so to be conformed to his image – who for us and our salvation

has made peace by the blood of his cross;
 who mourned so that we could be comforted;
 who became poor so that in him we might discover the immeasurable riches of his grace;
 who was meek so that we will inherit the earth;
 who received no mercy, so that we might receive mercy, and actually become the sign of God's mercy in the world, for the sake of the world.

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