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15-18

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W48

All Saint's Day (Year C) 11:00 a.m. Baptism and 3:00 p.m. Evensong

Sunday 6 November 2016

Daniel 7:1-3,

Psalm 149

Eph. 1:11-23

Luke 16:20-30

The Joy of the Saints

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk. 6).

For the last fifteen years I have participated in the Pacific Coast Theological Society. We meet twice a year in Berkeley to read and respond to papers. We share our life's work, and I've come to realize, that we also share our life. This weekend I delivered a paper on theology and economics for our Global Climate Change theme. Jack Crossley, an 86 year old retired professor from USC, gave my favorite presentation, his autobiography.¹

Jack talked about his saints, his favorite theologians. He wrote his last ten papers on Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). In 1799 Schleiermacher published a book called *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. He tried to describe the ancient faith entirely in terms of modern life, with no appeals to anything supernatural. Whether you are theologically conservative or theologically liberal this was the beginning of our modern Western Christian way of seeing God.²

In the twentieth century Karl Barth (1886-1968) did the opposite. Rather than trying to describe faith in modern terms, he described modern life entirely in Christian terms. For Barth it all began with a feeling of disillusionment. He hated the way theologians claimed that God was on their side during World War I. Barth believed that those who followed in Schleiermacher's footsteps were too quick to domesticate God, to see God as our servant rather than to regard ourselves as servants of God.

So Barth emphasized the "infinite qualitative distinction" between human beings and God. He even called God the "wholly Other" who suddenly breaks into our existence through Christ. Barth believed that because of human sinfulness we cannot clearly see God and as a result we have to make a leap of faith.

Barth famously wrote that "the Gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather it is a question mark against all truths."³ And so he wrote 9,000 pages of systematic theology (called Church Dogmatics). Barth did not mean this work to last through the ages or to be the final expression on the matter. He believed that context is everything. Every interpretation of God's word, every effort to clarify the Gospel, can only be true to its

time. The work has to be done over and over again. As my friend Jack, the 86 year old professor said this, with a shock I realized that he meant that it is our turn now.

We have a very difficult Gospel before us and we need to begin by realizing that it will have a different meaning in every generation. Jesus writes, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk. 6). If this were not difficult enough for us, he goes on to say, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." You may not like it but this gospel is for us.

Today we celebrate All Saint's Day. The Roman government repressed the early church so severely that it was common then to know people who had died for their faith. Perpetua was a twenty-two year old noble woman who had just given birth to her baby. Felicitas was her pregnant servant. In the year 203 AD they were executed with their companions at military games celebrating the Emperor Septimus Severus's birthday.⁴

Every year on the anniversary of martyr's deaths the church would feel their ongoing closeness and remember what they died for. The word martyr comes for the Greek word *martureo* and it means to testify, to bear witness as you would in a law court. Before long there were too many martyrs and not enough days so we began celebrating all of them on All Saint's Day. When your friends are dying for your faith, Jesus' words "woe to you when all speak well of you" (Lk. 6), has an entirely different meaning than during a time of peace.

So what do these words mean for us right now? These are not the declining days of the Roman Empire. It is not Schleiermacher's age of expanding European colonialism and industrial power. We are not experiencing the end of Europe's empires and the rising fascism of Karl Barth's generation.

Our world is far from perfect and we do face serious challenges with climate change, continued population growth, the displacement of refugees and globalization. Twenty years ago the United Nations astonished us by pointing out that we have the power to completely eradicate global poverty (do you remember the Millennium Development Goals?).

In places like the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Western Europe, we have enough to eat. We are reasonably safe from violence. Over decades we are becoming less racist. Gay people can marry. We enjoy a cultural richness and an unprecedented freedom that earlier generations could not have imagined.

Millions of people want to immigrate to these societies and yet day after day you would never realize this from the news. Britain's exit from the European Union, this American presidential election, the rise of right wing politics overseas, have laid bare a terrible dissatisfaction with our shared project. For generations work ("being the provider") has been what gives us meaning. In America, compared to fifty years ago, there are three times as many working-age men outside of the labor force.⁵ New circumstances make it even more obvious that our values have to change. Our economy, our personal goals and the oil pipelines that feed it, can no longer be our gods.

And so to us Jesus says, "Woe to you who are full now... Woe to you who are laughing now... Woe to you when all speak well of you..."⁶ For me this is not a prediction of future punishment but a statement of fact. Woe to us who put our trust in material things rather than our spiritual life. Woe to us who believe that what we accumulate is more important than what we give. Woe, not because God will punish us, but because we are spiritual creatures who will not be fulfilled by anything less than the spirit.

Three weeks ago Lisa Miller a professor from Columbia University told us about a terrible crisis among our young people. In Fairfax County Virginia and Marin County California 85% of teenagers regard spirituality as unimportant in their lives. Lisa went on to point out that having a spiritual life as a teenager means being far less likely to suffer from depression or addiction to drugs and alcohol as an adult.⁷ Parents focus far too much on accomplishment and not enough on helping children develop an interior life.

Our society focuses on external, material values but these will not solve our problems. The trouble is not out there in the world. It is in our head and in our heart. We live on a planet of 7 billion people, none of us wants to suffer and at the same time there is so much suffering that we cause ourselves. Why?⁸

Happiness is elusive. You can't just tell yourself to be happy on command. C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *Surprised by Joy*. Not to spoil it for you but it is an autobiography and the joy that surprised him comes from God. The joy arises in little moments of transcendence when the divine light shines into our lives. It is greater even than happiness. A woman who has just given birth might not be called happy. We would say that she feels an overwhelming joy.⁹

What Jesus teaches is that we don't have to simply wait for those moments when God's truth is obvious to us. When we live compassionately, joy becomes a way of being. We enter into the presence of God when we love others. And this is the hard part, it is true even when we love those who hate us.

I believe that one of the greatest saints of our time is the Dalai Lama. His outward life has been anything but peaceful. When the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1950, the Dalai Lama was the leader of his people. At the age of fifteen he was responsible for the lives and the culture of six million Tibetans. He saw terrible things and only barely escaped with his life. He has lived in exile for fifty-six years under immense pressure. His smile and gentleness makes us forget this.

When the Dalai Lama speaks about being a refugee he talks about compassion and the opportunities it gave him to be useful, to learn and experience more life. He repeats this Tibetan saying. "Wherever you have friends that's your country, and wherever you receive love, that's your home."¹⁰

This morning we give thanks for the presence of Perpetua, Felicitas, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, C. S. Lewis and all the saints who served in their own time and have gone before us. We stand in solidarity with Jack Crossley, Lisa Miller and the Dalai Lama who inspire us. Brothers and sisters this is your country. Welcome home.

¹ Ten years ago Jack spoke mostly about his childhood faith. This time he talked about what influenced his thought in his twenties and early thirties. Jack Crossley, "Autobiography" The Pacific Coast Theological Society, 4 November 2016.

² Jews experienced a similar phenomenon with modernity. The development of Reformed Judaism led to a backlash or Orthodox Judaism and then even a bridging movement called Conservative Judaism.

³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans, 6th Edition*, Tr. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (NY: Oxford University Press, 1968) 35.

⁴ See "The Passion of Perpetua, Felicitas and their Companions," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passion_of_St._Perpetua,_St._Felicitas,_and_their_Companions

⁵ The Dalai Lama and Arthur C. Brooks, "Dalai Lama: Behind Our Anxiety, the Fear of Being Unneeded," *The New York Times*, 4 November 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/04/opinion/dalai-lama-behind-our-anxiety-the-fear-of-being-unneeded.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share>

⁶ In Greek the word for blessed is an adjective that describes the people. The word for woe is the interjection "ouai"! Almost like our word ouch.

⁷ Lisa Miller and Teresa Barker, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (NY: Picador Press, 2015) 17.

⁸ Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (NY: Penguin, 2016) 29-30.

⁹ Ibid., 32

¹⁰ Ibid., 38.