All Saints' Day (2026)

I am thinking this morning of a church, actually a school chapel. It is located on the campus of Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala.

It has a giant dome reminiscent of the one found atop St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

The reason I am thinking of this magnificent edifice is that it translates words found in Hebrews 12:1, 2 into architecture and art. These verses read:

"**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.**"

Inside this chapel, the first thing you see as you look up into the interior dome is Jesus with outstretched arms.

Surrounding Him, around the circumference of the dome, are portraits of those who have borne witness to the Saviour going all the way back to the beginning of the Christian era. These include:

**Felicitas**, an early Christian martyr.

**Athanasius**, unwavering defender of the full divinity of Christ during the Arian crisis of the fourth century.

**Augustine of Hippo**, perhaps the most influential thinker in the Christian Church after St. Paul.

**Thomas Aquinas**, the preeminent philosopher and theologian of 13th-century Europe.

In addition to these pre-Reformation saints, there are:

**Martin Luther**, who on this date in 1517 nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. His goal was to correct abuses that had crept into the Western Church (not the least being the sale of indulgences, which had become a lucrative fundraising scheme) and above all to reassert St. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith.

**John Calvin**, 16th century French theologian and reformer whose "Institutes of the Christian Religion" are still read today.

**Thomas Cranmer**, key figure in the Reformation in England and the chief architect of the Book of Common Prayer . . . one of many who suffered martyrdom during the reign of Bloody Mary.

Of course, these are just a sample of the great cloud of witnesses featured in this remarkable chapel.

We find encouragement in these super-heroes of the faith. From their vantage point on high, they call down to us, saying:

**"We finished the race God set before us. You can too. Carry on to the finish line!"**

With that said, there are many saints whose portraits will never make their way into churches and whose names are lost in the midst of time.

The little hymn dear to generations of Episcopalians gives us a broader, indeed a more Biblical, view of sainthood.

**"You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops,**

**or at tea; for the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too."**

In defense of this broader view of sainthood, the Greek word that stands behind our English word 'saint' is *hagias*. It means set apart, and that is the New Testament definition of a saint: one set apart for Christ's service.

And, if you think about it, that is the calling of every Christian. We receive this calling in our baptism.

YOU were marked as Christ's own and given the charge to fight manfully under His banner against sin, the world and the devil in this sacrament of the Gospel.

YOU were set apart to represent Christ in the world . . . to be a saint.

Of course, baptism is not something that is done to us externally, and *that is that*.

No, there must be an inner conversion and commitment on our part. Here is where today's Gospel comes into the picture. In the words of the first Beatitude, we must become "poor in spirit.".

That little phrase "poor in spirit" needs a little teasing out. In no sense does it mean taking on the appearance of a limp dish rag or putting on a 'humbler than thou' face for the world to see.

Rather, it is recognizing ourselves for what we are: **spiritual bankrupts** . . . those who stand in need of the love, mercy and healing of God.

"Miserable offenders" is the way the Prayer Book puts it. But let's be clear, "miserable" does not refer to how we *feel* at any given moment. It is indeed possible to be *merry* offenders, but that is not the point. Rather, "miserable" refers to our helpless state. We are

born into this world with a weight that pulls us down.

By nature, we are selfish and self-centered, and this selfishness and self-centeredness plays out in all sorts of ways.

Even our good deeds are often tainted. Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul has in mind when he writes in Romans 7:21: **"When I would do good, evil is present with me."**

More than that, we cannot overcome this problem on our own. We cannot save ourselves, not now, not ever. What then is needed?

We must become *poor in spirit*. Put another way, we must acknowledge our need and face the truth about ourselves.

Then and only then will we be able to receive the free gift of God's pardon and help in human life. "By grace are ye saved . . ."

Have you done this? Have you laid your parcel of failure at the foot of the cross? Or are you still trying to carry it yourself?

If you are doing the latter, still lugging that parcel around, why the delay? Leave it there. Hear and respond to Jesus' gracous call: **"Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."**

I should say here that the nine beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount do not refer to distinct groups of individuals. Rather they are a composite picture of those who sign on to Jesus' kingdom agenda.

The Beatitudes, moreover, should be heard as a challenge . . . as a challenge to come live Jesus' way, and this requires effort on our part. It may well mean:

--Forgiving some people we don't want to forgive. Becoming a peacemaker.

--Noticing and responding to the needs of others. Being merciful.

--Saying no to deep-seated temptations and passions. Becoming pure in heart.

-- Standing for truth and the Gospel even when it is unpopular and may get us into trouble.

All of these are what it means to be a saint. Gypsy Smith, a singer and evangelist of the last century, turns the quest for sainthood into verse when he writes:

*Oh, to reflect His grace,*
*Causing the world to see*
*Love that will glow,*
*till others shall know*
*Jesus, revealed in me.*

Jesus revealed in me. That is what being a saint looks like on the ground

How are *you* getting on with this 'saint' business? How am *I*?

Can people recognize us as belonging to Jesus "**in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea?"**

The good news is we are not in this endeavor alone. Not only do we have role models to follow, but we have the Holy Spirit to empower us for this mission.

As I prepare to close, I am thinking of a second church, this one also a chapel of a divinity school.

Sadly, it no longer exists, as it was destroyed by fire on Oct. 22, 2010. It was at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria.

At the east end, over the altar window were words of Mark 16:15: **"Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel."**

That inscription was there to remind those being trained in this institution of their calling and mission. It was their send-off charge.

The charge – Go ye . . . preach the Gospel -- is for those in the ordained ministry, absolutely!

But it is also given to all who have been set apart for Christ's service in baptism. It's part of being a saint . . . fulfilling the commission given at baptism.

J.C. Ryle, the first bishop of Liverpool, put it this way: **"A Christian is a walking sermon. They preach far more than a minister does, for they preach all week long."**

I might augment his quote to say . . . not only do the sermons ordinary Christians preach preach all week long, they preach in places a clergyman may never go.

That thought is enough to carry us through this coming week . . . to give us a roadmap to follow.

In conclusion: Go out and be that sermon. Be a saint.