

"HEROES OF THE FAITH"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 2, 1986

## "HEROES OF THE FAITH"

### INTRODUCTION

Yesterday was All Saints Day. The church early on decided to honor the lives of the saints. It was obvious that the disciples and the apostles ought to be honored. They were practically revered during their life time anyway. And what better way to do that than to set up a special day in their honor - name it after them, tell their story, have a special Eucharist, a thanksgiving to God for the gift of their lives?

But a problem soon developed. After a while there were too many candidates to fit on the calendar. Each little town had its "favorite son" or "daughter" candidate for canonization. And when the Church became an international institution, it got even worse. Politics began to come in to it. Italy had too many saints, so France had to come up with some more. Spain, of course, needed more saints, and Germany ought to have a few more as well. And so this process of canonization became bureaucratized. An office was established - applications received, criteris of sainthood put down, and a committee appointed to investigate.

### DEVELOPMENT

And that had two effects. First, it slowed down the flow of saints and second, it made Protestants forever suspicious of them. Sainthood became a Roman Catholic institution. Except perhaps on St. Patrick's Day...when most of us join in the festivities and wear the green.

I confess that I grew up believing that the whole system of canonization was close to superstition. And some of it was and for some, still is. But I'm beyond that now. I see saints in a different light, and I'm receptive to a definition of saints - for Protestants - made by a Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Sweden, Bishop Nathan Soderblom. He said:

"A Saint is someone who makes it easier for others to believe in God...."

I feel that we're in danger of losing a dimension of Christian life if we ignore the saints. For what saints do is to provide us with some heroes of the faith. Their lives are to be our examples, and let's face it, we need some heroes.

### SOMETHING ABOUT HEROES

Let me say something about heroes. There are those who say that heroes are now gone from our lives, but that's not true. There are still heroes. I think our human nature will always create them. Human nature is such that we will always lift up icons or models or heroes - examples of what we believe is the highest achievement of life. It's called "hero worship". That's what bothers me about our time. Not that we don't have heroes, but that the heroes we have are not worth emulating.

Several years ago the World Almanac polled 2,000 8th graders and asked them who their hero was - who it was that they wanted to be like when they grew up, what person did they look up to in our culture. The poll revealed that the leading role model for these 8th graders was Burt Reynolds. And he was followed by such celebrities as Richard Pryor, Alan Alda, Steve Martin, Robert Redford, and John Belushi. All those listed were either celebrity entertainers or sports personalities. No statesman, no scientist, no educator, no painter, no musician, no lawyer, no doctor, no one who contributes something to the betterment of human beings.

And Sydney Harris, who took the poll, also commented on it, saying:

"Societies need role models more than anything else. They need people they can look up to and emulate. A nation that does not reward and respect real accomplishments is weakening its own moral fiber and preparing for its own collapse."

Heroes are no small matter. They either elevate what is common and base in our human nature or they inspire what is noble. You look at a culture to see who it lifts up as its heroes and that will tell you a lot about that culture.

#### MIDDLE AGES

Take the Middle Ages, for example. It was the age of saints. It was a mean and violent age, much like ours. That's all most people have to say about it. They compare it with what came afterwards - the Renaissance and the Reformation - and point out that by comparison the Middle Ages were dark. It was inferior to what came after it. What they don't see is that the seeds of the Renaissance and the Reformation were planted in the Middle Ages. One age doesn't stop and another all of a sudden begin. History's a process - a movement. The Renaissance and the Reformation which Luther helped to bring about were the flowering of what had happened earlier in the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages was the age of Saints.

Barbara Tuchman wrote about the building of cathedrals in the 13th Century. It was one of mankind's most amazing achievements. She described it this way:

"It was a period of innovation and audacity. In a single century, 600 cathedrals and major churches were built in France alone. In England, the Cathedral of Salisbury, with the tallest spire in the country, was completed in 38 years. The spire of Freiberg in Germany constructed entirely of filagree in stone, as if span by some supernatural spider; in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, the fifteen miraculous windows swallow the walls. They have become the whole."

Tuchman offers various reasons for this "explosion" in creativity. As you can imagine, each discipline has its own reason for it. The political scientist says it was because of the emergence of strong monarchies and political stability. The economists say it was because of the rise of capitalism and the store of cash. And, of course, the engineers and architects say that it was because of the ribbed vault and the flying buttress. But those are all means. The motivating factor behind it all was belief. Belief about God. Belief about human beings - who we are, why we are here, what is the purpose of our lives. Tuchman put it this way:

"It was an age that believed that with God's grace - anything is possible!"

Now that's a great age. And out of that age came the greatest accomplishments in Western civilization. They came out of belief. That's the point. Belief about God and about us and what we can accomplish. With God's grace, anything is possible. The saints were those "who made it possible for the rest to believe" that. That's what the saints are for. They illustrate to us what we are capable of doing...if we trust God's grace...if we believe.

ALL SAINTS DAY / OUR SCRIPTURE LESSON

Yesterday was All Saints Day. Today is All Souls Day. All Saints Day came about because there were too many saints to fit on the calendar. So the major ones got their own private days and the minor one got thrown into the Holy Bin - which is now called All Saints Day. And the rest of us come in on All Souls Day.

The Scripture Lesson from Revelation that Ann read earlier was designed to be read on All Saints Day. It's a marvellous passage. All the saints are there. John describes the crowd. First of all, he says there are 144,000. That's a symbol, of course. We're not to take it literally. That's a symbolic way of speaking, typical of Jewish apocalyptic literature. There were 12 tribes in Israel. And if you take a nice round number out of each one, say 12,000, that's 144,000. It's not a census count, just John's way of saying there were a lot of people there. Then he says the same thing in the very next sentence, only another way,

"A great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, every tribe, every tongue - they're all there...standing before the Throne".

That's the Scripture for all Saints Day. The purpose of the Book of Revelation is to enable us to see the end - to see the way it's going to conclude. And the great message of the book is that God is in control. In the end it's going to be as it was in the beginning - "the strife is or will be over, the battle done, the victories of life all be won". That's the scene in this passage. It's all Saints day and the bleachers are crowded, standing room only, those seated managed to get there early. It's a big crowd, a multitude that nobody can possibly number, from every nation, tribe and tongue - and because of their witness, this old world is a much better place. That's part of what John is saying

DO YOU KNOW SOME IN THAT NUMBER?

Do you know some in that crowd? I'm sure you do! I do. A lot of them. I've had funerals for them and committed their spirit to the Lord. They've all struggled, just as you and I do - and they more than most of us. And what makes me remember them, and makes me sure they are in that number, is that the more they suffered the more they became a blessing to others. They made you feel that God was in charge. And death didn't change them; they changed my attitude about death. They've surely got to be in that number. Do you know anybody in that number?

I know others who paid dearly for what they believed in; they got a dirty deal. They were dealt with unfairly. They stood for what is right and what is good and they paid the price. They paid more than I would ever be willing to pay. And they didn't talk about it, they just picked up and went on. They didn't complain - no self-pity. They just did what they felt they ought to do and left the world a little better than it was before. They're in that number. All kinds of people. Anybody can make it. There's even room there for you and me.

Stanislavsky, the great Russian dramatist, said, "There are no small parts, there are only small actors."

All Saints Day is the evidence that this is true not only of the theater, but of life itself. You have the potential for greatness in the way you play the role that has been given to you. God has arranged things in this life so

that there are no small parts. Every life counts for something - ultimately.

It's message is for the saints on earth. "Take courage and hang in there. Don't give up. Remember...you're supposed to be in that number. So there's no excuse." You can't say, "But my part is too small". It isn't. It's up to you. Go for it. Don't say, "Look...I'm too sick...or I'm too frail...I'm too this or too that." There's no excuse. You look at the saints and you'll see there's no excuse for your not being there in that great crowd. Move out - with faith and courage.

#### SOME EXAMPLES

If you study the saints, you'll discover that they're really something of a "sorry" lot. Start with Peter. He was an ignorant fisherman...no reason why he should ever be in that number. He couldn't keep his word. He promised to be loyal, made some great resolutions, until the time came when it was either "put up" or "shut up" and he "shut up". Yes, Saint Peter one day got turned around and became the Rock that Jesus saw in him.

And Paul, the Apostle. They say he was not an attractive man; we know there were two things about his life that he struggled with. One was self-righteousness; he kept putting down other people. The other was what he called that "thorn in his flesh" - epilepsy, or something that he had to wrestle with. He prayed to God to be delivered from it; he never was. He's in that number.

And Augustine. He had the greatest mind of his age, but for half of his life he was more interested in chasing the girls around the back streets of Carthage and Rome and joining whatever cult happened to be around at that time. His mother, Saint Monica, shed a lot of tears for her boy until one day in 386 in Milan he wised up, turned around and went on to mold and influence the world for Christ. Saint Augustine.

Luther - a man who wrestled with melancholy or depression all of his life. And Kierkegaard did too. Kierkegaard was probably psychotic. He's in that number. And Wesley - like Paul - self righteous. He drove himself so hard he was impatient with other people. I'm glad that I'm a spiritual descendant of John Wesley and not a contemporary. He'd be tough to get along with.

You know I can't find a saint who doesn't have some reason for not being one. Not a one. They all have a legitimate excuse for not being in that number. But they're there - as example - to show what is possible and what can be accomplished in your life and with your life - if only you trust God's grace!

#### EXAMPLE OF COWPER

I close with the story of William Cowper, the hymn writer. A contemporary of John Wesley's in England's 18th century, Cowper was the composer of quite a few hymns, among them the hymn we sang a few moments ago, "God moves in a Mysterious Way". What interested me in Cowper was that like so many saints he suffered from depression all his life. He was a Calvinist. He converted to Calvinism. Most people who convert to Calvinism do so so they can have the assurance that they're among God's "elect". When Cowper converted to Calvinism he was immediately certain that he was among the "damned". He tried to commit suicide three times. On the third attempt he failed so miserably that he was sure that it was due to the intervention of God. And that's when he wrote "God Moves In a Mysterious Way".

One biographer said of Cowper that he wrote poetry all of his life to ward

off his depression. So think of his struggle the next time you sing his hymn and think especially of that third verse which goes:

"Ye fearful saints - fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy  
And shall break with blessings on your head!"

He took what life handed him. He took his part and made the most of it. He showed us in a way that there are no small parts - only small actors. And that's what All Saints Day is all about....a great multitude who believed that with God's grace anything is possible! All Saints Day provides us with great heroes and presses this question upon us all: are you going to be in that number, that day when the Saints come marching in?

PRAYER        O God, we thank thee for the lives through which the light of  
Your presence has come into our world and blessed us so  
abundantly. Help us to learn from them as we knew them and copy them more  
and more. And when we are discouraged, remind of the race that they once ran,  
and give us the will to follow in their path, knowing always that the race is  
worth running.

Draw us more closely into their fellowship that by association with them  
our lives may be quickened, that we may be encouraged to strike out into the  
deeps of our own lives...and to live them with as much honesty and courage  
as they lived theirs. In the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

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"A Saint is someone who makes it easier  
for others to believe in God...."

I believe that a whole dimension of the Christian life is lost to us if we ignore the saints. For what saints do is to provide us with some heroes of the faith. Their lives are to be our examples and let's face it, we need some heroes.

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And Sydney Harris, who took the poll, also commented on it, saying:

"Societies need role models more than anything else. They need people they can look up to and emulate. A nation that does not reward and respect real accomplishments is weakening its own moral fiber and preparing for its own collapse."

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#### MIDDLE AGES / CATHEDRALS

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They are our heroes.

Day came about because there were too many saints to fit on the calendar. So the major ones got their own private days and the minor ones got thrown into the Holy Bin - which is now called All Saints Day.

The Scripture Lesson from Revelation that was read earlier was designed to be read on All Saints Day. It's a marvellous passage. All the saints are there. John describes the crowd. First of all, he says there are 144,000. That's a symbol, of course. We're not to take it literally. That's a symbolic way of speaking, typical of Jewish apocalyptic literature. There were 12 tribes in Israel. And if you take a nice round number out of each one, say 12,000, that's 144,000. It's not a census count, just John's way of saying there were a lot of people there. Then he says the same thing in the very next sentence, only another way,

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DO YOU KNOW SOME IN THAT NUMBER

Do you know some in that crowd. I'm sure you do! I do. A lot of them. I've had funerals for them and committed their spirit to the Lord. They've all struggled, just as you and I do - and they more than most of us. And what makes me remember them, and makes me sure they are in that number, is that the more they suffered the more they became a blessing to other people. They made you feel that God was in charge. And death didn't change them; they changed my attitude about death. They've surely got to be in that number. Do you know anybody in that number?

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It's message is for the saints on earth. "Take courage and hang in there. Don't give up. Remember...you're supposed to be in that number. So there's no excuse." You can't say, "But my part is too small". It isn't. It's up to you. Go for it. Don't say, "Look....I'm too sick. I'm too frail. I'm too this or that." There's no excuse. You look at the saints and you'll see there's no excuse for your not being there in that great crowd. Move out - with faith and courage.

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Luther - born 500 years ago this year - 1483 - wrestled with melancholy or depression all of his life. And Kierkegaard did too. Kierkegaard was probably psychotic. He's in that number. And Wesley - like Paul - self-righteous. He drove himself so hard he was impatient with other people. I'm glad that I'm a spiritual descendant of John Wesley and not a contemporary. He'd be tough to get along with.

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CLOSING        And that's what All Saints Day is all about. A great multitude nobody could number, who believed that with God's grace anything is possible. My friend, you talk about heroes. You want some heroes for our time? All Saints Day provides them, and asks you this question: Are you going to be in that number, that day when the saints come marching in?

PRAYER        O God, we thank thee for the lives through which the light of Your presence has come into our world. Help us to learn from them as we know them more and more. When we are discouraged, remind us of the race they once ran and give us the will to follow in their path, knowing that the race is worth the running.

Draw us more closely into their fellowship that by association with them our lives may be quickened, that we may be encouraged to strike out into the deeps of our own lives and live them with as much honesty and courage as they lived theirs.

In the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

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Barbara Tuchman wrote about the building of cathedrals in the 13th Century. It was one of mankind's most amazing achievements. She described it this way:

"It was a period of innovation and audacity. In a single century, 600 cathedrals and major churches were built in France alone. In England, the Cathedral of Salisbury, with the tallest spire in the country, was completed in 38 years. The spire of Freiberg in Germany constructed entirely of filagree in stone, as if spun by some supernatural spider. In the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, the fifteen miraculous windows swallow the walls. They have become the whole."

And Tuchman offers various reasons for this explosion in creativity. As you can imagine, each discipline has its own reason for it. The political scientist says it was because of the emergence of strong monarchies and political stability. The economists say it was because of the rise of capitalism and the store of cash. And, of course, the engineers and architects say that it was because of the ribbed vault and the flying buttress. But those are all means. The motivating factor behind it all was belief. Belief about God. Belief about human beings - who we are, why we are here, what is the purpose of our lives. Tuchman put it this way,

"It was an age that believed that with  
God's grace - anything is possible!"

Now that's a great age. And out of that age came the greatest accomplishments in Western civilization. They came out of belief. That's the point. Belief about God and about us and what we can accomplish. With God's grace, anything is possible. The saints were those "who made it possible for the rest to believe" that. That's what saints are for. They illustrate to us what we are capable of - if we trust God's grace....if we believe.

They are our heroes.

ALL SAINTS DAY / OUR SCRIPTURE LESSON

Tomorrow is All Hallow's Eve - the day before All Saints Day. All Saints

Day came about because there were too many saints to fit on the calendar. So the major ones got their own private days and the minor ones got thrown into the Holy Bin - which is now called All Saints Day.

The Scripture Lesson from Revelation that was read earlier was designed to be read on All Saints Day. It's a marvellous passage. All the saints are there. John describes the crowd. First of all, he says there are 144,000. That's a symbol, of course. We're not to take it literally. That's a symbolic way of speaking, typical of Jewish apocalyptic literature. There were 12 tribes in Israel. And if you take a nice round number out of each one, say 12,000, that's 144,000. It's not a census count, just John's way of saying there were a lot of people there. Then he says the same thing in the very next sentence, only another way,

"A great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, every tribe, every tongue - they're all there...standing before the throne."

That's the Scripture for All Saints Day. The purpose of the Book of Revelation is to enable us to see the end - to see the way it's going to conclude. And the great message of the book is that God is in control. In the end it's going to be as it was in the beginning - "the strife will be over, the battle done, the victories of life all be won". That's the scene in this passage. It's all Saints day and the bleachers are crowded, standing room only, those seated managed to get there early. It's big crowd, a multitude that nobody can possibly number, from every nation, tribe and tongue - and because of their witness, this old world is a much better place. That's part of what John is saying.

DO YOU KNOW SOME IN THAT NUMBER

Do you know some in that crowd. I'm sure you do! I do. A lot of them. I've had funerals for them and committed their spirit to the Lord. They've all struggled, just as you and I do - and they more than most of us. And what makes me remember them, and makes me sure they are in that number, is that the more they suffered the more they became a blessing to other people. They made you feel that God was in charge. And death didn't change them; they changed my attitude about death. They've surely got to be in that number. Do you know anybody in that number?

I know others who paid dearly for what they believed in; they got a dirty deal. They were dealt with unfairly. They stood for what is right and what is good and they paid the price. - They paid more than I would ever be willing to pay. And they didn't talk about it, they just picked up and went on. They didn't complain - no self-pity. They just did what their felt they ought to do and left the world a little better than it was before. They're in that number. All kinds of people. Anybody can make it. There's even room for you and for me in there.

Stanislavsky, the great Russian dramatist, said, "There are no small parts, there are only small actors."

All Saints Day is the evidence that that is true not only of the theater, but of life itself. You have the potential for greatness in the way you play the role that has been given to you. God has arranged things in this life so that there are no small parts. Every life counts for something - ultimately.

It's message is for the saints on earth. "Take courage and hang in there. Don't give up. Remember...you're supposed to be in that number. So there's no excuse." You can't say, "But my part is too small". It isn't. It's up to you. Go for it. Don't say, "Look....I'm too sick. I'm too frail. I'm too this or that." There's no excuse. You look at the saints and you'll see there's no excuse for your not being there in that great crowd. Move out - with faith and courage.

#### SOME EXAMPLES

If you study the saints, you'll discover that they're really something of a sorry lot. Start with Peter. He was an ignorant fisherman...no reason why he should ever be in that number. He couldn't keep his word. He promised to be loyal, made some great resolutions, until the time came when it was either "put up" or "shut up" - and he "shut up". Yes, Peter got turned around and became the Rock that Jesus saw in him.

And Paul, the Apostle. They say he was not an attractive man; we know there were two things about his life that he struggled with. One was self-righteousness; he kept putting down other people. The other was what he called that "thorn in his flesh" - epilepsy, or something that he had to wrestle with. He prayed to God to be delivered from it; he never was. He's in that number.

And Augustine. He had the greatest mind of his age, but for half of his life he was more interested in chasing the girls around the back streets of Carthage and Rome and joining whatever cult happened to be around at that time. His mother, Saint Monica, shed a lot of tears for her boy until one day in 386 in Milan he wised up and went on to mold and influence the world for Christ.

Luther - born 500 years ago this year - 1483 - wrestled with melancholy or depression all of his life. And Kierkegaard did too. Kierkegaard was probably psychotic. He's in that number. And Wesley - like Paul - self-righteous. He drove himself so hard he was impatient with other people. I'm glad that I'm a spiritual descendant of John Wesley and not a contemporary. He'd be tough to get along with.

You know I can't find a saint who doesn't have some reason for not being one. Not a one. They all have a legitimate excuse for not being in that number. But they're there - as examples - to show what is possible, and what can be accomplished in your life and with your life - if only you trust God's grace!

#### EXAMPLE OF COWPER

I close with the story of William Cowper, the hymn writer. A contemporary of John Wesley's in England 18th century, Cowper was the composer of quite a few hymns, among them the hymn we sang earlier today, "God Moves In A Mysterious Way". What interested me in Cowper was that like so many saints he suffered from depression all of his life. He was a Calvinist. He converted to Calvinism. Most people who convert to Calvinism do so so they can have the assurance that they're among God's "elect". When Cowper converted to Calvinism he was immediately certain that he was among the "damned". He tried to commit suicide three times. On the third attempt he failed so miserably that he was sure that it was due to the intervention of God. And that's when he wrote "God Moves in a Mysteriou Way".

One biographer said of Cowper that he wrote poetry all of his life to ward off his depression. So think of his struggle the next time you sing his hymn and think especially of the third verse which goes:

"Ye fearful saints - fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy

And shall break with blessings on your head!"

He took what life handed him. He took his part and made the most of it. He showed us there are no small parts - only small actors.

CLOSING And that's what All Saints Day is all about. A great multitude nobody could number, who believed that with God's grace anything is possible. My friend, you talk about heroes. You want some heroes for our time? All Saints Day provides them, and asks you this question: Are you going to be in that number, that day when the saints come marching in?

PRAYER O God, we thank thee for the lives through which the light of Your presence has come into our world. Help us to learn from them as we know them more and more. When we are discouraged, remind us of the race they once ran and give us the will to follow in their path, knowing that the race is worth the running.

Draw us more closely into their fellowship that by association with them our lives may be quickened, that we may be encouraged to strike out into the deeps of our own lives and live them with as much honesty and courage as they lived theirs.

In the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen