

1 November 2022 - Feast of All Saints

Rev 7:2-4.9-14; 1 Jn 3:1-3; Mt 5:1-12a

Abakaliki Abbey, Nigeria

Homily

These words of Jesus are surprising words. They are not very 'religious'. There is no question of religion, not even of prayer. They refer to real life - a life in which there are people who suffer and are comforted, people who are subject to their fate and are finally fulfilled, people who are hungry and thirsty for justice, people who are pure of heart and work for peace in this world, but also poor people and the persecuted. A world, after all, not so different from our own. And to this world Jesus offers happiness. A happiness that is available to everyone, if instead of running after the idols of money and power, we opt for the reign of God. "Blessed are the poor; they have chosen the kingdom of heaven".

It is all these happy people that we celebrate today, those of yesterday and those of today. Those whom we have known in our own lifetime and those who have lived since the beginning of time - and whom we also know in some way. All Saints' Day is not a monument to the unknown saint, like those "unknown soldier" monuments in military cemeteries or in the central square of some cities.

What we are celebrating is the holiness of God incarnate in men and women of flesh and blood. Ordinary people, with their qualities and faults, their virtues and sins; not paranormals from the spiritual world. People who have experienced possible holiness, not impossible holiness.

We also celebrate a reality that is more difficult to define and which is called, in the ever so obscure language of theology and spirituality books, the communion of saints. In fact, all those in whom God's holiness has been expressed in the past and continues to be expressed today form a great family. They are united in a great unity, a union, a communion - together and with God. We who believe in God are part of this family, since, despite all our limitations and even despite our sins, God's holiness is manifested in us in some way. And so we can perceive it in Him and in all His saints, since it is not completely foreign to us.

We are sometimes asked: "Where is this multitude of saints who have lived throughout the centuries? -- A false question! - They are nowhere to be found. Just as God is nowhere to be found. At the

moment of death, the human being, who was created with a share in the eternity of God, does not cease to exist. He is simply freed from the limitations of time and space. He is therefore present, like God, in all times and places without being imprisoned by any.

Since all our knowledge depends on the images we form of realities beyond ourselves, when we think of life after death we can only do so in images. So we imagine a place called heaven. We also imagine the conditions of life in that place. Just as we imagine who God is. Obviously there is nothing wrong with this. On the contrary, we cannot know anything without using images, without imagining realities that are beyond imagination. The important thing is to always remain aware that these images are only small intuitions of a reality that is infinitely beyond us - and therefore beyond all imagination.

Once we understand this, we can leave aside all the pious and often tasteless imagery that describes either sentimental scenes of heaven or dreadful scenes of hell. But at the same time we can find much encouragement -- and also light -- in the works of the great masters of imagery such as the great poets and mystics. It would be worthwhile to re-read today the grandiose imagery of Heaven in Dante's Divine Comedy. But let us not go that far. We had, as a first reading, a description of heaven from the Apocalypse of St John. If we are looking for an exact description of a "place" that would be called "heaven", this description is disconcerting, to say the least. But if we try to penetrate a little more deeply into the mystery of that communion which unites us with God and with all those who have gone before us on the earthly pilgrimage, we will find this imagery of great beauty. Let us close our eyes and imagine those one hundred and forty-four thousand blessed ones dressed in white standing before the throne of the Lamb. We can only wish to be one of them, to be part of this communion, to let ourselves be invaded by the same happiness.

But if images are necessary, we do not live in a world of images. We must keep both feet on the ground and open our eyes again quickly. Jesus' recipe for happiness, or what we call his beatitudes, does not belong to the world of images. Instead, Jesus brings us back to reality - the reality of everyday life, where there are poor people to be helped, sad people to be comforted, hungry people to be fed, victims of violence to be rescued, peace to be restored - even if all of this can lead to misunderstanding or persecution. It is in all this that the happiness to which Jesus calls us is to be found - an unimaginable happiness, for it is beyond all images.

Armand VEILLEUX