

Last February, our pilgrim group set out early from Nazareth for Capernaum along the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Our first stop was in Tagbah at the Franciscan Church of the Primacy of St. Peter. It is said to be the place where Jesus named Peter as the rock upon which his church would be built. Quaint and beautiful church, and just steps from the sea, many of us took time to pray at the shore in the peace of the calming waves.

As we set off for a walk along the main road, suddenly appearing out of a rocky cave in the hillside came a voice, shouting, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. ". We stopped to listen, drawn in by Jesus' familiar words from his Sermon on the Mount. And for that moment, we began to imagine what it might

have been like to have been present as Jesus spoke with words that would alter the lives of his listeners. There was Jesus, the radical and outcast Jewish Messiah, proclaiming God's blessing upon the outcast of Galilee. When we hear the beatitudes, we may not imagine how controversial Jesus' words were at the time, nor the staying power they would have through the centuries. With his words Jesus radically redefined what it meant to be blessed, who the Blessed were, and who they are, even to today.

As I recall this moment, I can't help but be conscious of all those who have come before us — those whose lives Jesus transformed; those who built these churches so that we pilgrims might connect more deeply with our faith, and those who gave of their lives to proclaim the gospel, to ensure that the Good News of God in Christ Jesus continues to be shared. On this All Saints' Day, I remember

these saints of God who inform our faith, and I give thanks.

Kathleen Callahan, Professor of Practical Theology at St. John's University reminds us, though, that “the feast of all saints isn't really about any particular person so much as it is about what it means to belong to the communion of saints. Christians believe that all the living and the dead form one mystical body in Christ, and we are joined together in one communion.” It is through this construct that we honor not only those who have died, but that we are called to acknowledged and honor one another — we within this community of faith, and our neighbors outside of these walls. Today as we celebrate this community of holy life together, in which we live, we of course remember particular saints, people who are examples of exemplary, godly, living, or who have graced our lives

with wisdom, encouragement, and have helped us to become who we are.

There is a deep connectedness that we share, an interconnectedness, if you will, that we honor and celebrate on this feast day. And it's important to remember that our saints are not just those we name on the church calendar or people who have done extraordinary things. Rather, our communion of saints is composed of ordinary people, like you and me, each with our own unique experiences, gifts and contributions, and our own experiences of suffering. Jesus helps to gather us in — to call our attention to the other.

Jesus, who himself was poor, had no ability to bless others with possessions. And without honor in the Jewish community, he would not have been seen as someone who could

bestow honor on others. Yet, because he was acutely aware of God's presence and the bearer of God's grace, Jesus extended God's blessing beyond barriers — upon people that his society otherwise rejected. The Galileans were a mixed society and thus, not quite Jewish enough to be deemed clean or worthy. Many were without means or status and looked down upon. Those, like his disciples who heard his voice and followed, or those who would choose to be bearers of mercy, of peace and who would stand against injustice in his name would suffer rejection or persecution. With a word, “Blessed”, or “makarios” in the greek, Jesus bestows God's grace, and promise of salvation.

Certainly, Jesus was not asking the people to be “happy” in their plight, but rather, the use of the word makarios is an honorific — a bestowing of God's grace to those cast out by social and religious society. Imagine if we

heard Jesus' words, "blessed are the poor in spirit" instead as "how honored (by God) are the poor in spirit". How might this nuance transform our own hearing of the beatitudes?

Each time we hear the words of the beatitudes, something resonates within us, because we can relate. Each of us has known times when we have felt poor in spirit, or deep grief, or found ourselves hungry or thirsty for God's presence and grace in our lives. Yet, while I myself have known times of sorrow and despair, I have not personally had the experience of being cast to the margins of society. And so, it is important that I, that we, take note of Jesus' words and that we remember that when our neighbors suffer, we suffer too. Jesus names the difficulties that our neighbors face and calls them to our attention just as he names (and models) the ways in which we are called to care for the world, perhaps, reminding us that when we

take a stand against injustice, or persecution, or exile, or a stand for inclusion and acceptance, that we stand for and with God. It is in this standing with one another, the whole of our communion of Saints that the kingdom of heaven is accessible to us not just in the future, but right here and now.

Jesus promises us heaven, salvation, and blessing. I find great comfort in this — that the goodness of God's mercy, the goodness of God's peace, and the goodness of God's grace is a blessing for us all and available to us all. And so when Jesus tells us that our reward will be great in heaven, when we take a stand for the poor and the hungry, and the sorrowful and the suffering, we can be comforted that in striving to live our lives like Jesus, we will find ourselves comforted and cared for, and blessed when Jesus returns.

And so today, on this All Saints' Day and Pledge Sunday, let us begin by celebrating our beloved community here at St. Dunstan's. As children of God and followers of Jesus let us give thanks for all that we have, and that we are: For those whose lives, sacrifices and love have enriched ours; for the founders and members of this community of faith whose commitment of time, talent and treasure has made it possible for its walls to be built and God's love to grow within them. Gaze around this sanctuary, and recognize & bless one another as living saints – each who make St. Dunstan's who it is today. Whether you have been here a long time, or if you just walked in the door today for the first time, your presence is a blessing to us and I pray that we may be a blessing to you.



As we renew our baptismal covenant, let's carry with us gratitude for all who have come before, all present today, and for those we have yet to meet. May our fervent prayer be that, *with God's help*, we too, may be a blessing.