

than the use of tongue or pen. When we die, we shall certainly direct our mental concept outwards, as we have always done, yet without robing it in the fashion of speech. The answer will come in the same manner, and we shall appreciate it.

But of course our hope goes far beyond this. In the beatific vision angelic speech takes on the cadence of the divine, in the sense of being beyond all natural powers, and we are invited to join those conversations. By grace we may hope to speak to God and in God with familiar ease, and to 'hear' that voice in obedience to which the entire universe entered into being.

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## A SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS<sup>1</sup>

BY

THE VENERABLE BEDE

(Translated by Vincent Kerns, M.S.F.S.)



ODAY, dearly beloved, we are celebrating the feast of all the saints in one joyous solemnity. Those saints whose fellowship is the delight of heaven; whose protection is the joy of earth; whose triumphs are the Church's crown; whose confessing of the Faith glows brighter in esteem, the braver their torments made it. For the harder the fight the greater the warriors' glory; and many and varied are the sufferings which furnish the triumph of martyrdom. As the severity of their tortures increases, so too does the reward. Our Mother, the Catholic Church, extending far and wide throughout the world, was clearly taught by Christ Jesus, her Head, to fear neither insults, nor tortures, nor even death itself. Strengthened ever more and more, not by resistance but by endurance, she was the inspiration of the triumphal glory of all those whom the penalty of imprisonment brought together in a glorious army, with one and the same ardent courage to fight the battle.

O truly blessed Mother Church! so resplendent with the honour of God's esteem, so radiant with the glorious blood of triumphant martyrs, arrayed so splendidly in the dazzling virginity of their un-sullied confession! Neither roses nor lilies are wanting among her

<sup>1</sup> Migne: *Patrologia Latina*, vol. xciv, col. 450. (*Homiliae Bedae Venerabilis Subdiacac*—hom. lxx.) Extracts from this sermon form the lessons of the second nocturn for the feast of All Saints and within the Octave in the Roman Breviary.

flowers. Let each one strive now, dearly beloved, to be really worthy of both prizes, of the two crowns: that white as snow from the pure and chaste, and that purple-hued for those who suffer. Both peace and war have their own flowers in the armies of heaven, and with these the soldiers of Christ are crowned.

For the unbounded goodness of God, which it is beyond words to express, has also taken care that the span of trouble and strife should not be prolonged, should not be made tedious or never-ending. Instead, it should be short, lasting—so to speak—but for a moment. It is this brief and tiny life that will contain the trouble and strife, while the crowns and the rewards of all our merit are in that which is eternal; the troubles will speedily come to an end, but the merited rewards endure for ever; the darkness of this world will give place to a vision of most beautiful light, and to the possession of a happiness greater in measure than the bitterness of all earthly sufferings. The Apostle gives proof of this when he says: 'Not that I count these present sufferings as the measure of that glory which is to be revealed in us' (Romans 8, 18).

With open arms the heavenly city receives the returning warriors, greeting in them the bearers of the trophies of a conquered foe. It is not only victorious men who come; women, too, have their place in that procession, who have prevailed over their sex in addition to overcoming the world. Virgins, there are, and youths, doubling the glory of their warfare, surpassing by their virtues the tenderness of their years. And entrance into the palace of that eternal court is not for them alone; it is afforded also to the rest of the multitude of the faithful, who in peaceful union have kept the faith intact, firmly and unshakeably instructed by God's commandments.

So come now, brethren, and let us enter on the way of life. Let us return to the heavenly city in which we are enrolled and inscribed as citizens. 'You are no longer exiles, then, or aliens; the saints are your fellow citizens, you belong to God's household—heirs of God, sharing the inheritance of Christ' (*Ephesians* 2, 9; *Romans* 7, 17). The gates of this city are opened to us by fortitude, and courage will afford us a proud entrance. Let us contemplate, therefore, the wonderful happiness of that city, in so far as that is possible: for, indeed, there is no language capable of describing it.

It is written somewhere of that city that 'there will be no more mourning, or cries of distress, no more sorrow. Can anything be happier than that life, where there is no fear of poverty, no weakness or disease? Where harm can come to no one, where no one can be angry, nor envious, where inordinate desires cannot be fanned into flame? No one can be tormented there with the desire of honour or the seeking after power. No fear there of the devil, no snares there

of evil spirits, for it is far removed from the terror of hell. No death there, either of soul or body; but life, rendered delightful by the gift of immortality.

There will not be any discord then, but all things will be in harmony, and mutual understanding between everyone; for there will be one harmony of all the saints, peace and joy binding everything together. All is serene there, and at rest. The brightness there is perpetual; it cannot be compared to our sunlight, for its blessedness makes it shine more brilliantly. Because that city, as we read (*Apoc.* xxi, 23; *Daniel* xii, 3), has no need of sun to shine in it; the glory of God will shine there, and the Lamb will give it light. There shall the saints shine as the stars throughout an unbroken eternity; and those, too, whose lives are a lesson to many, shall shine as the brilliance of the vault of heaven.

And so there is no night there, no darkness, no gathering clouds, no extremes of cold or heat, but everything perfectly regulated—"things no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart conceived" (*1 Cor.* 2, 9), except those who are found worthy to enjoy these things, whose names are written in the book of life, and who have "washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb and stand before God's throne, serving him day and night" (*Apoc.* 7, 14-5). Neither has old age any place there, nor the afflictions of old age, whilst everyone reaches "perfect manhood, that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ" (*Ephesians* 4, 13).

But far greater than all these things, indeed, it is to enter into fellowship with the companies of the angels and archangels. To enjoy fully the companionship of the Thrones, too, and of the Dominations, the Principalities and Powers, and of all the celestial, supernatural Virtues. To gaze upon the squadrons of the saints, sparkling more brilliantly than the stars. To contemplate the patriarchs, glittering with faith; the prophets, joyful in hope; the apostles, judging the world in the twelve tribes of Israel; the martyrs, resplendent with the purple garlands of victory; the glistening-white choirs of virgins, too, wearing their wreaths of flowers.

But the King who dwells in their midst, no words are able to describe. His dignity, his beauty, his perfection, his glory, his nobleness, his majesty, these escape all expression in speech, they cannot be grasped by the human mind. For greater far it is than all the glory of the saints to attain to his presence which surpasses all our estimation, and to be made radiant with the splendour of his majesty. It would be worth while suffering torments daily—it would be worth while enduring even hell itself for a little while—if by these means we might see Christ coming in glory, and be given a place in the company of the saints. Should we not consider it well worth while to

have borne all our sorrows patiently, if it gave us a share in such goodness and such glory?’

Think, beloved brethren of the glory of the just! Think of the great gladness of the saints, when every face will shine as the sun, when our Lord will begin to muster his people in separate ranks in his Father's kingdom, and bestow the rewards promised for the merits and works of each individually! When he will give heavenly things for earthly ones, eternal things for temporal ones, great things in place of little ones! When he will introduce the saints to the vision of his Father's glory, and enthrone them with himself above the heavens (cf. *Ephesians* 2, 6), to the end that God may be all in all! When he will give to those who love him the eternity he promised them, and the immortality which he purchased for them with his life-giving blood! When, finally, he will lead them home to paradise and open the kingdom of heaven, faithful and true to his promise!

Let these things be firmly engrafted in our senses, be understood by the fullness of our faith, be loved with all our heart, and be obtained by the noble quality of unceasing works. The prize is well within the fighter's power, because ‘the kingdom of heaven opens to force’ (*Matt.* 11, 12). And the price to be paid for this prize, O man, which is the kingdom of heaven, is none other than for yourself. It is worth what you are worth. Give yourself, and then it belongs to you. But why let the price worry you? Christ gave himself up in order to win you as a kingdom for God, his Father. Give yourselves, then, after Christ's example, so that you form God's kingdom; ‘you must not, then, allow sin to tyrannize over your perishable bodies’ (*Rom.* 6, 12), but become instead the subjects of your higher nature and save your lives.

May we be attracted, therefore, to strive after the prize stored up for those who perform works worthy of salvation. Let us compete for it cheerfully and readily. Let us all run in this contest of virtue, of which God and Christ are the spectators. We have already begun to rise superior to this life and to this world; let us not hinder our progress by any longing for what this life has to give. If the Last Day shall find us running swiftly and unimpeded in the race of salvation, our Lord will not fail to reward our merits. For he who will give a crown of purple hue for their sufferings to those who are victorious in persecution, will also give a dazzling white diadem in return for the merits of their virtues to those who triumph in peace. Neither Abraham nor Isaac, nor Jacob, for example, were put to death; and yet, distinguished by the merits of their faith and virtue, they were entitled to the first place among the patriarchs. And everyone without exception, who is found to be faithful, just and praiseworthy, is assigned a place in their festal assembly.

We should remember that it is God's will that must be fulfilled, not our own; for the man who does God's will lives on for ever, just as God continues for ever. And so, dearly beloved, let us be ready to do what God wills in everything, with a sound judgment, an immovable faith, solid virtue and perfect charity. Thus we shall resolutely be keeping our Lord's commands: innocence in simplicity, harmony in charity, modesty in humility, carefulness in all our undertakings, watchful attention in helping those in distress, tender-heartedness in assisting the poverty-stricken, steadfastness in defending the truth, prudence in disciplinary strictness—so that nothing shall be wanting in us to serve as an example of good deeds. For these are the footprints left to us by each of the saints as they returned home to their fatherland, so that by keeping to their pathways we may also come to their joys.

Let us consider that paradise is our homeland as well as theirs, and already we shall begin to regard the patriarchs as our ancestors. Why, then, do we not hasten and run to see our fatherland and greet our ancestors? A great multitude of loved ones is eagerly looking out for us there; a vast and mighty crowd of parents, brethren and children are longing for us (of their own salvation they are now assured, but they are anxious still for us). How great will be their joy and ours, when we come to see them and receive their embrace—the pleasure those who are waiting for us in heaven will take in our company, who share with them the service of God—the supreme and never-ending bliss! The glorious choir of the apostles is rejoicing there, so too is the distinguished band of joyful prophets, the numberless host of martyrs crowned for their victories in battle, and the shining train of virgins; there also there is praise for the fortitude of those who confessed their Faith. And that same reward is waiting too for those who, in obedience to our Lord's commandments, treated the inheritance of earth as nothing in comparison with the treasures of heaven.

If we long for the pleasure of their company, let us hasten on our way with insatiable eagerness to be with them as soon as possible and for a speedy union with Christ. May we have him for our guide on our journey, who is the source of salvation, the prince of light, the liberal giver of unrestrained joyfulness, who lives and reigns with God the almighty Father, and the Holy Spirit.