

## *Famous*

All Saints Day (Solemnity), November 3, 2019  
Church of the Ascension, Chicago  
The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

Let us now sing the praises of famous men,  
our ancestors in their generations.  
The Lord apportioned to them great glory,  
his majesty from the beginning.  
There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,  
and made a name for themselves by their valor;  
those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;  
those who spoke in prophetic oracles;  
those who led the people by their counsels  
and by their knowledge of the people's lore;  
they were wise in their words of instruction;  
those who composed musical tunes,  
or put verses in writing;  
rich men endowed with resources,  
living peacefully in their homes~  
all these were honored in their generations,  
and were the pride of their times.  
Some of them have left behind a name,  
so that others declare their praise.  
But of others there is no memory;  
they have perished as though they had never existed;  
they have become as though they had never been born,  
they and their children after them.  
But these also were godly men,  
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;  
Their offspring will continue forever,  
and their glory will never be blotted out.  
Their bodies are buried in peace,  
but their name lives on generation after generation.

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10,13-14

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;  
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then  
he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
"Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.  
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst  
for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
"Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.  
"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness'  
sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute  
you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my  
account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in  
heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the proph-  
ets who were before you.

Matthew 5:1-12

Over the years, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with '*famous men*,' in particular the famous men whose praises we are encouraged to sing in today's first reading. Having been shaped by my own generation and culture, I naturally wonder: Where are the women? How, if at all, were women's roles and values and contributions understood—or not—by the author of this text in his own generation and culture?

My discomfort with this text, however, is mainly about matters other than gender *per se*. The author clearly endorses the notion that the good life, or at least the best life that one can lead, relies on fame: *let us now praise famous men*. This endorsement crosses over time and geography to strike a resonant chord in our own fame-obsessed culture. Billionaires. Tech innovators. Global newsmakers. Best-selling authors. The winners of the World Series. In the eyes of the author of Ecclesiasticus, God endorses their fame: *The Lord apportioned to them great glory*. Notice the commendation of "rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes." Join me in imagining the lavish photo spread in the latest *Condé Nast Traveller*.

To be sure, the author does go on to mention those whom he clearly imagines to be the little people, the ‘also-rans,’ those who “*have perished as though they had never existed ... [but] whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.*” The famous get long and laudatory obituaries in the New York Times. The little people are lucky to get a death notice in the Poughkeepsie Journal.

I’ve always avoided delving into this All Saints Day text from Ecclesiasticus, and when I went looking for resources to better understand it, I learned that most—actually all—of my usual scholars and commentators also avoid it. The best source I could find on short notice is a Jewish Encyclopedia, published in 1906. The authors describe the Book of Ecclesiasticus as “*a collection of moral counsels and maxims, often utilitarian in character and for the most part secular .... mysticism is utterly opposed to the author's thought.*” For these and other reasons, Ecclesiastes was not included in either the canonical Hebrew Scriptures or Protestant compilations of the Bible. In the Revised Common Lectionary, this text is no longer appointed or even optional for All Saints Day.

Without knowing a lot more, we may all be able to sense the contrasts between what is exalted in this text from Ecclesiasticus and what Jesus commends in today’s gospel passage, the opening portion of what we now call the Sermon on the Mount.

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth ..*

*"Blessed are the pure in heart [famous or not], for they will see God."*

In fairness to those who selected these appointed these readings, I suppose we can see a certain logic in opening our All Saints worship by singing the praises of the famous. This is the day on which we remember and give thanks for the collective faith and good works and perseverance of all who are canonically recognized in various calendars and commemorations of the Church. Their names and faith have endured over time, in some cases for millennia. In this sense, we may rightly think of them as ‘famous.’

Some but not all saints were also famous during their earthly lives. Even if so, *aspiring* to fame has never qualified anyone for genuine sanctity. Such aspiration has likely *disqualified* a few, or many. We commemorate saints not for having been famous but for being *poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart, persecuted for righteousness’ sake*. Consider as an example Mother Theresa of Calcutta, arguably world famous through many decades of her life, but apparently, even in her fame untouched by it in her character or mission or privilege. “*It’s not about how much you do,*” she once said, “*but about how much love you put into what you do.*”

If the communion of saints were to collectively author an opening reading for today’s feast, I wonder if it might read: *Let us now sing the praises of those who were infamous in their time, and only later were vindicated and genuinely understood; the outliers, those who risked ridicule to do the right thing; those who crossed the line into our comfort zones and made us irate until by some grace, through them, our comfort zones opened wider, became more generous; those who were privileged but who did not pamper but rather emptied themselves, for the benefit others; those who made the hard decisions that no one else was willing or able to make; and let us sing the praises of those whose names we will never know, who were invisible to most others even in their lifetimes, but who showed remarkable heroism and love and perseverance, even in the context of horrible suffering or wrongdoing or monotony.*

I may seem to have disparaged this morning’s message from Ecclesiasticus. But on further thought, I’m grateful it’s there. I’m grateful that we heard it. It succinctly describes motivations and values of the world that still endure. It lays bare the world in which you and I still live, the real-world context of our own faith and values and priorities and decisions. Hearing this text may even lead us to uncomfortably wonder about all the ways that this is still, as they say, ‘a man’s world.’

The saints whose praises we rightly sing today are those, women and men, who knew and understood exactly how the world works. They chose to confront the world; they learned where to transform it; they knew when to walk away from it, in the name of a living, loving and just God.

Now it’s our turn, yours and mine. Different time, same world. How will you and I be remembered, and by whom, and for what?