

“IT IS DONE”

REVELATION 21: 1-6a

November 1, 2009 – All Saints Day

University Church of Chicago

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If you have been keeping up with the problems, possibilities and perils of our Chicago Bears—including last Sunday’s debacle against the Cincinnati Bengals—it’s hard to know whom to blame or praise: Lovie Smith seems to stand on the sidelines with a bewildered stare on his face; Ron Turner, the erstwhile coach of the misnamed Fighting Illini who is now the Bears’ offensive coordinator pores over his charts and laminated game plans up in his castle-like booth; and the defensive backs seem to have taken the day off.

Several years ago the Bears removed Michael McCaskey, the grandson of George Halas, as president of the organization. Mr. McCaskey’s mother, Virginia, is shown in a television long shot at each home game thoroughly ensconced in her skybox. The McCaskey family is, to put it mildly, one that operates on a very tight budget. Some people have even characterized them as cheap, miserly, afraid to spend money for talented players. A story, undoubtedly apocrypha, tells of Mike McCaskey hailing a taxi at the Drake Hotel and going to a meeting at the Bears office at 55 E. Jackson.

As he alighted from the cab, Mr. McCaskey handed the driver exact change for the fare. The driver looked at the money, turned around and asked, “What? No tip?” “Certainly,” replied Mr. McCaskey, “don’t bet on the Bears.”

Some things are pretty sure, almost certain and can be counted on. But not many. Will Alex Rodriguez or Ryan Howard dominate the World Series? Will the New Orleans Saints go undefeated this season? There’s some hope for answers to those questions. But I think I can say with a fair amount of certainty that Mike McCaskey offered good advice. The Bears will not be in the Super Bowl in January, 2010.

Christians want certainty, clarity, assurance. We want our prayers answered the way we think God, if God were as wise as we, would surely grant our wishes. It’s tough to live with ambiguity.

The Book of Revelation offers some dangerous stuff. The images and obsessions of the last book of the Bible have wreaked more havoc in people’s lives—created more strife, fomented more demonic fantasies, misled more people—than any other book in the Bible. But it also concludes with a word of hope and the promise of new beginnings. The beginning of the twenty-first chapter contains a double vision of a new earth and a new heaven out of which the holy city (the new Jerusalem) comes down from God (vv. 1-2). The apocalyptic language and the images it presents echo the hopes of the Hebrew prophets and other early Jewish apocalypses. The message affirms God’s final triumph and the outcome of the struggle of the faithful.

“Write this,” John of Patmos is instructed by the Spirit, “for these words are trustworthy and true...It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end”(vv. 5-6).

All Saints Day is a signal day in the liturgical life of the Church, because for one thing we celebrate endings and beginnings. The message of Revelation affirms God’s final triumph and the outcome of the struggle of the faithful. Most of us in University Church are not “into” visions. I don’t know about you but I have enough trouble making sense of the stuff I can touch and feel and understand without God lifting me as she did John into a heavenly realm where he can view earthly existence from God’s perspective.

Still, All Saints Day gives us the opportunity to view our struggles and conflicts in light of the lives of the faithful who have preceded us in death and whose lives we remember on this special day. The holy city image reminds us that we live in community, in fellowship.

A book to which I keep returning is the poet Phyllis McGinley’s *Saint Watching*. She is fascinated by saints—not because they are pious and sanctimonious, but because they are seekers, pilgrims, people in love with life. She says that she watches saints because she finds them as varied and colorful as anything a birdwatcher could hope to see. St. Francis called the swallows his sisters and once tamed a wolf. But did you know that St. Dominic preached to the fish along the shore when nobody came to church to hear his sermons? (Given the polluted state of Lake Michigan, that may be the reason we have so few people attending University Church.) I love the fact that St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians of the church, was called in school “the dumb ox.”

Then there was Teresa of Avila who argued constantly with God. When she one time was caught in a fierce rain storm, she shouted, “Oh God, it is no wonder you have so few friends when you treat them like this!” And Catherine of Sienna who wrote like an angel and lectured the pope and thereby gave women a respectable place in society.

Among the saints in Ms. McGinley’s collection are whores, vagabonds and thieves. Some were gregarious and some were hermits. Some like Francis of Xavier traveled through a dozen kingdoms with “no more eye for the scenery than a migrating bird.” Others like Fra Angelico loved beauty and painted it.

Phyllis McGinley considers a saint a sort of genius: “Like musicians, painters and poets, saints are human beings, but obsessed ones. They are obsessed by goodness and by God as Michelangelo was obsessed by line and form, as Shakespeare was bewitched by language, Beethoven by sounds. And like other geniuses they used mortal means to contrive their masterpieces.”

The masterpiece of a saint, of course is her or his life. Their lives are their miracles and all the rest is commentary. A saint, it seems to me, is one whose heart can withstand the corroding effects of daily living. Fatigue and despair do not nibble away at the good intentions of the saints. Troubles do not consume their kindness and love of others.

Do you know that old story about the boy sitting in church with his mother as he looked at the stained glass windows on All Saints Day? When they left the worship service, his Mom asked him what he had heard and learned. "Who is a saint," she asked? Remembering the images in the windows, he replied, "A saint is a person who lets the light shine through."

Many years ago when I was the age of that lad, I wondered—and I still wonder after all these years—why so many people who call themselves Christian, who go to church regularly and think of themselves as good and righteous are so mean and spiteful and nasty and hurtful and difficult and downright mean. How can one be counted among the saints when so little of Jesus' humility and compassion and hope shine through?

I remember leaving a Billy Graham crusade at War Memorial Stadium in Little Rock many years ago when I was a student at the University of Arkansas. Graham had preached a magnificent sermon, George Beverly Shea had rocked the place with his singing and hundreds had come forward that night to commit their lives to Christ. As we went into the parking lot a very pious woman who was one of the leaders of a major congregation in Little Rock was excoriating a policeman because she could not find her car. She called him every name a Baptist could think of—and then some. She was a very creative Arkansas cusser. As she walked away in a huff, the police officer turned to my friends and me and said, "If that woman is going to heaven, I will be happy in hell."

The incident reminded me of Mark Twain's comment, "When I die, I would like to go to heaven for the scenery. But I would rather go to hell for the conversation."

The secret of the saints is that they consider moderation a sin. Their dreams are wild, their ambitions billed with a kind of desperate vitality. Many of the saints when we live with them and know them appear to us as crazy. But let us not forget that it is the cracked ones who let the light shine through.

Jesus commands us to feed the hungry. The saints feed the hungry. Jesus commands us to clothe the naked. The saints clothe the naked. Jesus commands us to sell all we have give to the poor, go preach the good news to everyone, to turn the other cheek, to return good for evil. The saints do all these things because they believe the commandments mean exactly what they say. They are those who take literally Paul's words to the Corinthians: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (I Cor. 13:7).

Thoreau looked at his neighbors in Concord and wrote that most of them, it seemed to him, led lives of "quiet desperation." I think most twenty-first Christian saints, on the other hand, lead lives of quiet heroism. But we must go beyond quiet heroism in these desperate times. After eight years of increasing loss in Afghanistan where our predator missiles label us as terrorists and our continuing presence is regarded as an occupation, can we really quietly acquiesce to another Vietnam? As much as we love Barack Obama, we must pray for him to make the right decision about sending more troops. In one of America's five most segregated cities, can we continue to live quietly in our neighborhoods and ignore those who live in fear of gangs and violence and drug dealers?

In his wonderful and disturbing novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis paints a picture of Jesus and John the Baptist that speaks to us about the tradition of the past and the call of the future. Jesus and John are sitting high above the Jordan River in the hollow of a rock where they have been arguing all night long about what to do with the world. John's face is hard and decisive; from time to time his arms go up and down as though he were actually chopping something apart. Jesus' face, however, is calm and hesitant. His eyes are full of compassion.

"Isn't love enough?" he asks John.

"No," John answers angrily. "The tree is rotten. God called me and gave me the axe which I then placed at the roots of the tree. I did my duty. Now do yours. Take the axe and strike!"

"If I were fire, I would burn," Jesus replies. "If I were a woodcutter, I would strike. But I am a heart and I will love."

We know John's point of view better than we know Jesus', don't we? We want certainty. We want clear, helpful answers to our questions. We want a faith that doesn't pose unanswerable questions but one that gives us simple answers. We don't want the burden of waking up every day without knowing what it's going to bring us. We want God to be like the tooth fairy—you put your hand under the pillow and find the treasure to replace all your losses. But all you find is the sheet.

In addition to remembering and celebrating those who have triumphed over the struggles of disease and death, John's vision helps us to see their lives from the perspective of eternity. We honor the saints who have come before us, whose examples we wish to follow and the saints who will come after us. We belong to the communion of saints—past, present and future. In this holy community call the Church we partake of the divine.

In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt's memoir of a boyhood of luminous horror, he recalls the last days of his friendship with Patricia Madigan. They meet in Limerick's Fever Hospital, where he is recovering from typhoid at the age of ten and she is dying from diphtheria at the age of fourteen. They talk back and forth from one room to the other and "she reads me part of a poem which I have to remember so I can say it back to her early in the morning or late at night when there are no nuns or nurses around."

They are working day by day, stanza by stanza through the poem's suspenseful narrative about "the highwayman" who came riding "up to the old inn-door." But before they are finished, the nurse moves Frank upstairs because "diphtheria is never allowed to talk to typhoid." Patricia dies two days later and Frank wonders how the poem ends.

Seamus, who sweeps out the wards, "doesn't know any poetry at all—especially English poetry...Still, he'll ask the man in the local pub where there's always someone reciting something and he'll bring it back to me." Later Seamus reports that "a man in his pub knew all the verses of the highwayman poem and it has a very sad end. Would I like him to say it because he never learned how to read and he had to carry the poem in his head. He stands in the middle of the ward leaning on his mop and recites" the

concluding stanzas. "Now if you want to know any more poems, Frankie," he says, "tell me and I'll get them from the pub and bring 'em back in my head."

There are those who recite the poetry, tell the stories and hold them in their hearts as well as their heads. They are the saints, the prophets and the poets God sends to tell us of a grace that meets us at every corner.