

# The Character of God and Saints

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on November 5, 2017

[http://lectionarypage.net/YearA\\_RCL/HolyDays/AAllSaints\\_RCL.html](http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/HolyDays/AAllSaints_RCL.html)

Let's paint the scene, shall we? Stories abound about an itinerant teacher and preacher who is coming to the area. People seem to know him and his family and seem to be astonished at how much he knows, how he connects with people on their level. The way people have been talking about him, you'd think he was the long-awaited Messiah or something. I mean, there have been some false-starts, some guys who claimed to be the Messiah and met a quick end. Could he be the leader who leads the people to repel those Roman scoundrels? He's said to be the cousin of John, the firey mouthed preacher who called people vipers and fruitless trees. Now that John's in jail, this new guy, Jesus, has been teaching to small groups, recruiting a few disciples and volunteers along the way. And the crowds keep getting bigger and bigger. He was teaching in a synagogue last week, and now he's walking to the top of hill and more townsfolk are following after. In the back of their mind, people begin to think about the stories they'd heard of their forefather Moses going up a mountain and telling people what God had told him. Those who keep track of such things have lost count of the throng of people who are gathering around to hear him. He takes a seat like one of the older, more seasoned rabbis, but he's actually pretty young. No one can recall a rabbi of this age gathering such a multitude of people.

The crowd gets quiet. Jesus looks around. Smiles. Takes a deep breath... So, is this it? Is this where he's going to lay out how it is the people of Israel take back their land? How they turn this promised land back into a kingdom that belongs solely to God? Is now the time? Or will he be critical of Herod who threw his cousin John in prison? What about the Roman governor or even Caesar? What about those nasty tax collectors? With a setting like this, he could really rile up a crowd and those dirty Romans would never know what hit them. He opens his mouth and says,

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*

Poor in Spirit? Mourning? What in the world?? But yet, he keeps going, and no one dares interrupt him because they want to hear what he has to say next.

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

*"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 prophets who were before you."*

The people who are gathered are anticipating a warrior or a freedom fighter. Instead they hear of someone who speaks of being a peacemaker, being persecuted for righteousness sake, of being merciful. This is the reason John will send messengers from his jail cell to say "Are you the one who is to come or should we keep waiting?"

But what else should we expect from an God who is constantly doing the unexpected? A God who sends sun and rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. A God who sends unlikely messengers to unsuspecting audiences. A God who chose to be born in an out of the way place to an unwed mother. When the people expect a leader who tries to lead by violence, God sends a Messiah, a Son, who says "Love your enemies;" someone who says, "Not an eye-for-an-eye. Give your cloak to the one who takes your coat;" someone who says, "yes, you should pray, but you don't need to do in such a way that everyone knows what you're doing."

We have come to call this set of blessings the Beatitudes, which comes from a Latin phrase meaning "favored by God." They are often held up as a way of living for followers of Jesus, a set of characteristics to which we should aspire. That's only true because they are first and foremost attributes of the character of God as we see in Jesus. So if we are to be imitators of him, then we should live in the ways the Beatitudes recommend. The fact that we sometimes struggle with that isn't a sign of moral weakness but rather a lack of faith. We struggle to live as though we believe that God will comfort those who are mourning or that the meek could possibly inherit anything of value, let alone the earth or that those who show mercy will receive mercy. Jesus doesn't say that these are characteristics of those who **already are faith-filled people**, but these are the characteristics of a faith-filled God whom Jesus represents. It's what we sometimes call the "already and not yet" character of God's kingdom. None of the blessings Jesus lays out in his sermon on the mount are fulfilled dreams. Each one is spoken in the future tense, acknowledging that we can see these things come to fruition if we can trust in a God who can and will make them happen.

On All Saints' Day, we celebrate those who have gone before us in faith and in doubt, in hope and in fear, that God's blessings will carry the day. There are two kinds of saints: Those we know about and those we don't. Those we know about are the ones who have churches and hospitals and schools named after them. We also know about saints who may be remembered primarily in their own communities, like Manteo and Virginia

Dare, the saints of this Diocese who remind of us the first Christian baptisms in North America. In Memphis, they remember Constance and her Companions<sup>1</sup>. In Birmingham, they remember Jonathan Myrick Daniels<sup>2</sup>. In Zimbabwe, they remember Bernard Mizeki<sup>3</sup>. There are the saints, too, that we don't know; those whose faith is known to God alone or maybe to a few others here and there. There are two other kinds of saints, also. Those who are dead, and those who are alive. In all but a few of the Apostle Paul's epistles, he refers to the saints at the church to which he is writing. He's not writing to dead people, but to people who are actively striving to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the world. Saints, both alive and dead, serve as a reminder to each of us of the nature of a God who values humility and compassion.

It is easy for us to look at the big named saints, the writers of the Gospel, the Apostles, the leaders of the early church as guides for virtuous living. But there are countless others, many of whom have crossed in and out and through our own lives, who have reminded us of the character of God, the faithfulness of God, the holiness of God. If I were to ask you to make a list of those people, you'd come up with teachers, parents, grandparents, children, scout leaders, coaches, employers and employees, people from church and people not from church who all showed you just a little bit more about what it means to live in the light of God's love. But that's not enough.

And to be sure, there are people who look to **you** to be reminded of God's character and faithfulness, and holiness. I imagine that our humility would kick in and we would struggle to come up with a list of people we have influenced, but I almost imagine that the list might look similar: Children, parents, grandparents, scout leaders, coaches, employers and employees, people from church and people not from church. Our lives ring out like the old hymn, "for the saints of God are just like me, and I mean to be one, too." Don't ever act like it doesn't.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://satucket.com/lectionary/Constance.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://satucket.com/lectionary/Jonathan\\_Daniels.htm](http://satucket.com/lectionary/Jonathan_Daniels.htm)

<sup>3</sup> [http://satucket.com/lectionary/Bernard\\_Mizeki.htm](http://satucket.com/lectionary/Bernard_Mizeki.htm)



