

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, our Lord, and our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, we are observing the Feast of All Saints, which is gazetted for the 1st of November. All Saints celebrates all those who are saints. 'Saint' literally means 'holy', so today, we celebrate those who have been made holy.

In our psalm, we learn that none of us are holy, and so 'saints' are those who have been made holy by Christ. We celebrate the baptised, we celebrate those who have died in the faith, and we especially celebrate those who have died for the faith. That is, on All Saints Day, we think of the martyrs, and in today's sermon I want to explain and help you understand some more about the martyrs.

In the early Christian church, almost all Christians were in the Roman Empire, at least in the first decades and maybe even the first centuries. The Roman Empire was very large. It covered much of southern Europe, most of northern Africa, and what we would now call the Middle East. The Romans loved law and order. When they invaded and took control of a place, they kept control with law and order, and to maintain their law and order, they used pretty strict punishment practices to deter insurrection. That is why we see insurrectionists on the cross next to Jesus, those who had attempted to overthrow the Romans.

The Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem so the Jews would stop fighting for it. And, of course, that is why we find Jesus on the cross because he is, in effect, executed as a political opponent of the Roman state (or that is the claim that the Jewish leaders make against him). The Romans used gory punishment as a form of deterrent from insurrection. It is in this setting that the New Testament is written.

Christians were under persecution almost immediately, for Christianity flourished after Pentecost. When everything clicked for the disciples, who then started preaching, Christianity flourished in the Roman world. You could move quite easily around the Roman world, and Christianity did move quickly.

The Romans didn't like the quick spread of Christianity, so persecutions occurred for the first 300 years after Christ until the emperor Constantine made Christianity legal. Some of the New Testament letters were written to encourage those Christians under persecution. One example is First Peter, which says, 'I know you are suffering or about to suffer, but remember in your suffering Christ also suffered.' When you read First Peter, you'll see the strong encouragement to stand firm in your faith because Christ also suffered.

It is also where the Revelation comes to Saint John. Jesus gives John a vision, a revelation, so that John can send that letter to the seven churches that are undergoing persecution. They get that letter as an encouragement to see that Jesus has won a cosmic battle—a much bigger battle than what they are facing in persecution. They are encouraged to stand firm in their faith.

In our letter from Revelation today, we read specifically that Christ is making all things new and that he is going to wipe away tears and correct all the errors. You will note in your Bibles that these are quotes. They're quotes because they are words of Jesus, but they are also from the Old Testament. These are prophecies that Jesus is saying are going to be fulfilled.

We should talk a little bit about Old Testament prophecies. Many of the Old Testament prophecies have three fulfillments. I will try to explain. They have a partial fulfilment in the Old Testament. For example, we heard today, 'I am making all things new, I will wipe away all your tears.' These are the prophecies given to the exiles that they will return to Jerusalem, so they had partial fulfilment when the exiles did return to Jerusalem. You can read about that in Ezra and Nehemiah. That is a partial fulfilment.

Second, they are complete in Jesus. 'Behold, I am making all things new; I will wipe away all your tears; it is finished.' This is complete on the cross and in the resurrection. It is completed by Jesus. These prophecies are complete.

Jesus has taken them and used them as his Words, in this case in Revelation, and they will have a culmination. That is, those prophecies will have their final fulfilment in the resurrection, in Christ's return. Just as Lazarus was called from the tomb after being dead for four days and brought back to life through Christ's Word, he ultimately had to die again. However, he will be called into the resurrection into the new heaven and the new earth, where he will be reunited with Jesus, with his body and spirit together once more. He will have a new body, the same spirit and he will be with all the faithful in the resurrection.

These prophecies have a partial fulfilment in the Old Testament, but they are complete in Jesus and culminate in the resurrection.

We are currently examining the culmination of the resurrection, as the book of Revelation focuses on Jesus' triumph in the battle. Throughout Revelation, He overcomes various fearsome beasts, providing encouragement to those facing persecution or experiencing difficulties in their daily Christian lives. Jesus has already won the battle against these terrifying forces. Through the resurrection, He will make all things new and call people out of the grave into eternal life with Him. This is the promise and encouragement we receive on All Saints' Day, as well as the assurance found in the message of Revelation.

The encouragement is to stick with Jesus no matter the circumstances. We should adhere to His Word, rely on His promises, and trust in His faithfulness. Letters and sermons sent to churches enduring persecution serve as reminders that those who are in Christ can accomplish extraordinary things despite difficulties. To understand this better, we could look at Hebrews 11, which details the lives of those with great faith.

In the centuries following John's writings, we have records of many martyrs who exhibited remarkable courage in the face of persecution. This ability to perform extraordinary acts comes from the understanding that those who are in Christ are new creations, empowered to rise above significant challenges. To encourage you and help illustrate what these extraordinary

acts look like, I would like to share four stories of martyrs. These stories are from a book by Pastor Bryan Wolfmuehler titled *A Martyr's Faith in a Faithless World*. In this book, he compiles the stories of various martyrs and provides insightful summaries alongside a thoughtful exposition of the parable of the sower, discussing the challenges of maintaining faith in a world that often rejects it. I will now read these martyr stories as Pastor Wolfmuehler has presented them.

The first martyr we are going to hear is

Saint Perpetua: Martyr. Hero.

AD 203. Carthage.

Perpetua wrote the story of her own suffering when she was in jail. Second-century Christian author Tertullian preserved the account.

She was a young wife and mother, twenty-two years old, her only child still nursing. She came from a wealthy and noble family in Carthage. She believed in Jesus at a time when the Roman emperor forbade conversion to Christianity. She enrolled, with one of her brothers, as a catechumen even in the time of persecution.

She was arrested leaving church and thrown into a dungeon. Her father came to her urging her to renounce her faith.

Perpetua pointed to a pitcher of water. "Do you see that pitcher?" "Yes" "Can you call it anything but a pitcher?" "No." "So can I call myself naught other than that which I am, a Christian."

In this first imprisonment, she had a dream of a thin bronze ladder that extended up into heaven. All along the ladder were instruments of death, and coiled around the bottom was a massive serpent. Perpetua stepped on the head of the serpent and then climbed up the ladder to a garden.

Perpetua's father came to her in prison, weeping and begging her to renounce her faith. "Have pity on us," he said. "Think of your mother and brother and sister." Perpetua said, "God's will be done."

Perpetua was brought to trial. The proconsul was named Hilarian. As she was in line, she heard the others before her confessing Christ. As she stood before the judge, her father came to her with her infant son in his arms. He said with tears, "Perform the sacrifice! Have mercy on your child!" Even Hilarian said, "Spare your father's gray hair. Spare the infant. Make the sacrifice to Caesar."

Perpetua said, "I am a Christian."

Hilarian sentenced those who confessed to being Christian to be killed by beasts. He sent them back to prison. "We joyfully went," Perpetua wrote.

The night before they were to be given to the beasts Perpetua had another dream. She was a gladiator fighting with a great Egyptian. She triumphed over him, stomping his head with her feet. When she awoke, she wrote, "I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory."

Perpetua was to be destroyed by a mad cow. She was gorged. Her clothes were torn. "Stand fast in the faith," she said to those suffering with her, "and love you all one another; and be not offended because of our passion."

The impatient crowd demanded death for the Christians. Perpetua and the others were lined up and, one by one, put to death by the sword.

Saint Perpetua: Martyr. Hero.

We'll meet in the resurrection.

Polycarp: Martyr. Hero.

Circa AD 156. Smyrna.

Polycarp was bishop in Smyrna at the time of a persecution, and the pagan crowds cried out that Polycarp should be brought before them in the arena. Officials went looking for him. Polycarp wanted to remain in the town, but fellow Christians kept moving him from farm to farm to protect him. Roman soldiers found him, at last, in a small cottage. When they did, he asked that the soldiers be given food if they would give him an hour for undisturbed prayer. He prayed for two hours, for the churches throughout the world.

He was taken into the city on a donkey. The captain of the local troops, a certain Herod, met him and tried to persuade him. "What is the harm in saying 'Caesar is Lord' and offering a pinch of incense? Save yourself." Polycarp was silent. They persisted. He answered, "I won't do it."

Polycarp was eighty-six.

He was brought into the arena, and legend tells that he heard a voice from heaven. "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man."

In the arena, he stood before the proconsul, who also tried to persuade him. "Look how old you are. Swear by Caesar. Change your mind. Say, 'away with the atheists!'" (The Romans considered the Christians to be atheists, probably because the Christians refused to worship the Roman gods and the Caesar. And I suppose if you have a thousand different gods. one god would seem like none.) But Polycarp didn't miss a beat. He swept his arms around the crowd, indicated all the heathens in the crowd, and said, "Away with the atheists!" This is not what the proconsul wanted.

"Curse Christ," he insisted.

"Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Polycarp testified.

“Swear by Caesar!”

“I am a Christian. I swear by Christ. If you want me to teach you the faith, tell me when.”

“I have wild beasts,” the proconsul said.

“Call them.”

“I will burn you with fire.”

“Your fire lasts for an hour. There is an eternal fire that will burn the wicked,” Polycarp preached. “Why do you delay? Do what you will.”

The crowds cried for his death. It was announced three times to the crowd, “Polycarp is a Christian.” Word was gathered. They tied his hands behind his back. Polycarp looked into heaven and prayed.

“Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of you ... I bless you because you have deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Your Christ for resurrection to eternal life of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit ... For this and for everything I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved servant, through whom be glory to you with him and the Holy Spirit both now and under the ages to come. Amen.”

Polycarp: Martyr. Hero.

We’ll meet in the resurrection.

Romanus: Martyr. Hero.

AD 303. Antioch

The Christians in Antioch were being persecuted. Romanus, a deacon in Caesarea, travelled up to Antioch to strengthen the Christians. “The wolves are attacking the flock, but don’t be afraid.” The Lord used this preaching of Romanus to strengthen the faith of the Christians, and all of them - old men and women, fathers and mothers, young children - were ready to be martyred. None would renounce their faith and offer the sacrifice to Caesar. Instead, they all stuck out their necks for the sword, ready to die for their faith.

Asclepiades was the captain in charge of the persecution. He asked who was the cause of this rebellion, and learning of Romanus, he had him bound and brought before him “Are you the cause of this sedition? Are you going to be the cause of so much death? You will suffer in the same way that you have caused others to suffer.”

Romanus was not afraid. Quite the opposite. “I joyfully accept your sentence,” he answered the captain. “I’m ready to be sacrificed for my brethren.”

The captain was enraged. "Tie him up. Tear him open. Pour out his bowels." The soldiers protested. "It is not right to do that to a nobleman." "Then scourge him with whips with the lead tips." Instead of tears or groans, Romanus sang psalms as he was whipped and told the soldiers not to favor him because of his nobility. "It's not my family, it's my Christian faith that makes me noble."

Romanus preached through the torture, mocking the pagan gods, warning the captain that he would be judged by the Creator of heaven and earth. The captain had his sides lanced so that his ribs were exposed, and Romanus said, "I'm sorry, not at my injuries, but that you believe lies."

Romanus preached Christ. He urged the captain and all who could hear him to turn from their idolatry and trust in the blood of Jesus for eternal life. Asclepiades commanded Romanus to be struck in the mouth to stop his preaching. They knocked out all his teeth. They tore his eyelids with their nails. They cut open his cheeks with knives. They pulled out his beard with chunks of flesh.

To this Romanus said, "I thank thee, O Captain, that thou hast opened unto me many mouths, whereby I may preach my Lord and Savior Christ. Look how many wounds I have, so many mouths I have, lauding and praising God."

Romanus: Martyr. Hero.

We'll meet in the resurrection.

Saint Agatha: Martyr. Hero.

AD 251. Sicily

Agatha was a young woman, fifteen years old, who took a vow of virginity. She committed herself to the study of the Scriptures and prayer. This was during the persecution of Decius (250 to 253).

This was a great disappointment to Quintianus, who was determined to marry her. He was a judge, so he, knowing she was illegally a Christian, brought her into his court, offering her the option of marriage or torture.

She prayed, "Jesus Christ, Lord of all, You see my heart, You know my desires. Possess all that I am. I am your sheep: make me worthy to overcome the devil." Weeping and praying for courage, she confessed her faith.

Quintianus sentenced her to a month in a brothel where she was abused and assaulted. He called for her again, and when she still confessed her faith, she was tortured, stretched on the rack, torn with iron hooks, whipped, and burned with torches. She was sentenced to burning at the stake, but an earthquake saved her.

Agatha skipped joyfully to her execution, like she was going to a feast or a dance. She laughed and rejoiced. She said “Unless you cause my body to be broken by your executioner, my soul will not be able to enter paradise bearing the Victor's palm, even as a grain of wheat, unless it is stripped of its husk and harshly beaten on the threshing floor, is not gathered into the barn.”
{AE42:160}

Agatha: Martyr. Hero.

We'll meet in the resurrection.

Those who trust in Christ know he is capable of wiping away their tears. They understand that "it is finished" at the cross, recognising Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Having been made new creations, they endure great persecution, yet they continue to preach Christ and Him crucified, even for their persecutors. These individuals are the martyrs and the saints—those who are in Christ and remain steadfast in faith despite suffering. Christ is faithful to them. They are our heroes, demonstrating how to stand firm in the faith.

You have this same God. He is faithful to you. He has named you his own, claimed you as his own, and put his mark, the Holy Cross, on you.

You have his same words of promise: he will wipe away all your tears. He is making all things new. He will call you out of the grave into the resurrection. He is, after all, the beginning and the end. He is eternal yet above all time and space. You have His Word; it is here before you, readily available to you so that you can hear, believe, and trust in these promises.

You have the same Holy Spirit as these Martyrs. The Spirit comes to you in the Word, as your sins are forgiven, and the Spirit gives you the same courage to stand firm as these martyrs did.

Furthermore, because you have Christ and the Holy Spirit, you have the gift of discerning right from wrong. You have the ability not to follow your heart but to follow God and his Word and do what he calls you to do. You are able to make wise choices, discern the faithful way forward and deliberate even under challenging circumstances.

You have Christ. You are Christ's, you belong to him.

Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all our understanding keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.