WHEN THE SAINTS COME MARCHIN'

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
All Saints' Day
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"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."(Mt. 5:9f.)

Some years ago a cartoon appeared in the New Yorker showing two monks conversing. The one said to the other, "Brother Phillip, I deeply envy you because you did not waste ten years of your life in high-living and debauchery." This is the kind of image many of us have of the saint. We tend to think of the saint as one who wistfully looks back over his shoulder at his former worldly life. Oscar Wilde expresses this notion well when he says, "The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner a future."

Actually that kind of image of the saint, for the most part, is simply inaccurate. I guess it tells more about us and our sometimes petty concerns than it does about the saint. While occasionally he may have looked behind him, his attention was focused passionately on the future. He had a vision of the coming kingdom of heaven, and that vision, like a beacon, lighted his course, come what may. George Bernard Shaw is close to the essence of the matter when he observes in his Preface to St. Joan: "A saint may be defined as a person of heroic virtue whose private judgment is priviledged." Historically speaking, the saint is not a comical prude, but a courageous visionary.

I.

The saints knew where they were going. They had a vision of the kingdom of heaven. This is the way our Epistle lesson from the Book of Revelation describes it: "Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple.... They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more.... For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd."(REv. 7:15-17)

This, clearly, is figurative language, as all of the significant language in the Bible is figurative. It is not to be taken as an empirical description of the furniture of heaven. It points beyond itself. But it does point: it points to a radical and transcendent transformation of this universe, when hate and war, pettiness and vice, ugliness and evil, will be no more. It points to a mysterious and joyous fulfilment of the best of all we know, and more. That's where the saints think of themselves as going, into the majestic Future of God himself.

That's a large hope, is it not? It's all the more striking to our age, for by and large we are not concerned so much with the future, and therefore we have no evident hope. Our age looks to the present, as anyone can see. If you are under twentyfive especially, you are living in the Now Generation, as you know. The Now is what counts. The saint's vision of the future is, at the most, for most people, an

interesting historical relic.

Perhaps we are the better for having jettisoned the saint's vision. But perhaps we are not. More than a few sensitive men and women today would agree with Bernard Shaw's critique of our era. Shaw sees not only all the advances of science, and their value, but he also sees "hypocondria, melancholia, cowardice, stupidity, cruelty, muckraking curiosity, knowledge without wisdom, and everything that the eternal soul in Nature loathes, instead of the virtues of which [the saint] was the figurehead." Or, as Shaw puts it more sharply and with no little significance for our own day of rockets and thermonuclear bombs: "To Joan and her contemporaries we should appear as a drove of Gadarene swine, possessed by all the unclean spirits cast out by the faith and civilization of the Middle Ages, running violently down a steep place into a hell of high explosives."

Perhaps we should try to make some sense out of the saint's vision of the Future. Perhaps we need it for the sake of our beloved Now, lest it really and finally run down the hill to destruction. Perhaps we need to ask where we are going.

II.

But the saints knew not only where they were going, they also knew why they were going there. It was for the sake of <u>peace</u>. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." <u>The</u> sign of the authentic saint is that he makes peace. Captivated by the transcendent peace of God's Future Kingdom, the saint occupies himself with the work of establishing the peace of God on earth.

Notice the emphasis on activity here. The peace<u>makers</u>. The meaning of the word is dynamic. As the Psalmist says, "seek peace and pursue it."(Ps. 34:14) We tend to imagine peace, I think, as an inner state that somehow just happens to us, in those precious quiet times of life which we all crave. We have the image of the saint, accordingly, as the man on his knees in the quiet night looking up to heaven. This, we seem to think, is the peace which passes understanding. There's surely something to that, but there's also much more.

In this connection a certain contemporary Roman Catholic magazine has an advertisement to get new subscribers, which is very instructive. This is one of the several radical, bothersome, noisy Roman Catholic magazines which are flourishing in this country. By the way, I wonder why we Lutherans, conceived and born in protest, don't seem to have any radical, bothersome, noisy magazines. But in any case the ad shows a copy of the magazine folded inside the catholic prayer book. And underneath it says, "Put some muscle in your missal."

That's the way the authentic saint is. He's a peace<u>maker</u>. He has some muscle in his missal. In a like vein, the word peace itself doesn't just refer to inner peace or even just to the absence of strife. It refers also to personal and social and political well-being and righteousness. The saint is he who works for an end of strife <u>and</u> a beginning of justice, in this world. Here we probably will want to think of a man like Luther, who was intimately conversant with the social and political problems of his day. But perhaps even more we will want to refer to a man like Martin Luther King, who has been so

creatively at work for a biblical peace in our time. He has some muscle in his missal. He is working to establish the peace which passes understanding. And our time would surely have been impoverished without him.

III.

The saints knew, furthermore, not only where they were going and why they were going there, but they also knew what the cost would be. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." There is one prominent sign that God's will is being worked by the saint, on earth. Persecution. Or, tribulation.

This may not agree with some of our refined religious sensibilities. We don't like force and violence, and we shun it whenever we can. That's natural, I guess. But in doing so, we may be passing by the work of the saints. For wherever they are, there's persecution or tribulation. I am not saying that anyone who is persecuted or who is in tribulation is a saint; I am saying that the cost of saintliness is persecution or tribulation.

Consider the case of Luther. If it had not been for the prudence of his political supporters, he would have been captured and probably put to some stake, not unlike John Huss. Consider the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his commitment to work for that peace which passes understanding he entered the conspiracy to murder Hitler. And he was shot. Consider the case of Martin Luther King. How long will it be before a brick or a bullet will break his skull? "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And Luther and Bonhoeffer and King are of course only a few among many, most of whom are unknown to us, most of whom are suffering for righteousness' sake far from the main streams of contemporary life. They, too, are among the saints. They, too, are being persecuted or are suffering in tribulation.

IV.

Maybe that's why we find the saints so hard to take today. Maybe the popular feeling that the saints are moral prudes is only a guise to hide an underlying lack of moral courage.

But even if we aren't deceiving ourselves, I think we will still want to ask, -- How could they do it? How can they do it? How could the insignificant monk Luther confront Emperor and Pope? How could the mild Pastor Bonhoeffer confront Hitler? How could a black man from the South take on the whole white establishment? How can the garden variety Christian, here, there, and everywhere, set a collision course toward the powers of strife and injustice which are before him?

Yes, as Shaw says, a saint is a "person of heroic virtue whose private judgment is priviledged." But in what sense? Clearly, the saint does have a vision of the transcendent Future of God. He does have a vibrant hope. But there's more to it than that. I think the saint is one who knows that as he walks and works toward and for the Future of God, he is not left to himself and his own power. I think the saint is one who knows that his way has been walked and worked before. By

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the saints throughout the ages, to be sure. But much more by the One who walked and worked his way to Jerusalem, looking for the Kingdom of God, cleansing the temple, and then being nailed to a cross.

Is it not the case, then, that the priviledged private judgment of the saint is that he is not alone, that he does not have to depend on his own strength and his own courage, that the One who walked to the Cross is his hidden brother and helper on the road? That that One is with him and with all the saints, -- the Lamb, spoken of in the Book of Revelation, who is the shepherd of the saints, he who says to us, "Blessed are the peacemakers.... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...."

With the priviledged private judgment, which we renew together this morning, that the Lamb of God is with us, I think we too, amazing as it sounds, can be saints and are saints.