

# Saints of Blessed Memory

*A sermon for the Feast of All Saints by Nathan Nettleton, 1 November 2022  
Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23 & Luke 6:20-31*

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## Message

The faithful who have gone before us are held securely in the powerful gracious memory of God, where their love and prayers for us live on until we are united with them in resurrection.

## Sermon

It is unusual, though not unique, for a Baptist church to acknowledge the saints of the past as freely as we do in this congregation. The majority of Baptist churches are probably not holding services today to mark All Saints Day. Here though, we acknowledge a group of these heroes of the faith each Sunday in our liturgy, and we hear readings from some of their writings in our nightly Compline liturgies.

We don't have any system of official saints like some churches do. The Bible uses the word "saints" to speak of all followers of Jesus. That's all of us, not just those from previous generations who are remembered in our icons and prayers.

We don't become saints by being more extraordinary or more holy than other believers. We become saints by being gathered and baptised into the life and death of Jesus. As we heard from the letter to the Ephesians tonight, "In him you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory." What marks us out as saints then is what is special and unique about Jesus, shared with his whole body, not anything special that we accomplish as individuals.

Certainly there are saints who are remembered for grand and courageous acts of faith, but that is not what makes them saints. They were already saints. Our readings tonight included the beatitudes and Jesus's call to love our enemies and bless those who persecute us. That teaching is not given as the daunting preserve of a special few. It's the essential content of the covenant that all of us are called into. It might be extraordinary, but it is intended to be normal for us.

But churches do speak about being in communion with the saints of the past, so what is that about? What does it mean to talk about any sort of ongoing relationship with the saints of the past? Is it a bit like some sort of occultist summoning up of the spirits of the dead, or is there something more radically Christian to it than that?

To answer that question, we have to first ask what we think happens to people when they die.

Many people, Christian and otherwise, hold onto the comforting image of death being nothing but a horizon over which people pass to an immediate continuation of a disembodied life in another dimension, usually called heaven. While tonight's readings didn't address this, the stronger view in the Bible is that we die, body and soul, and stay dead until the day of resurrection when all will be raised. So how can the Bible and the Church also speak of an ongoing communion of saints?

Many of us have had experiences in which it seemed that a loved one has become present to us from beyond the grave in a comforting or helpful or even challenging way. Like those images of Harry Potter being surrounded by a cloud of past relatives cheering him on as he faced down Voldemort, we have felt the presence of lost loved ones in moments of crisis and need. Do these experiences not point to an ongoing life in which they can continue to pray for us, and sometimes even reach out to us like guardian angels?

In order to find a satisfactory answer to this puzzle, I think we need to focus on this image of being “in” Christ, or “in” God, and how that might be different from merely being “with” God. For the popular image talks of going off to live “with” God after death, but the Bible talks more about us being gathered “into” God.

How does that make a difference? Well what would you mean if you spoke of a loved one living on “in” you? You’d be talking about the power of living memories, wouldn’t you? You’d be describing how the memories of someone special go on living within you, at times seeming so tangible that it seems to make sense to talk of an ongoing relationship that guides and inspires your own living.

Now, hold that thought for a moment while I remind you that when Jesus calls us to remember him in the Eucharist, that remembrance is something much deeper and more powerful than merely calling to mind a distant memory. The remembering that God does and that God calls us to participate in doesn’t just recall the dead, it holds their lives in trust. It is the power that raised Jesus from the dead.

So if we can speak of someone living on in us as a memory, imagine how much bigger and more powerful and more alive that is when someone lives on in the memory of God. Over time, our memories fade, but our loved ones who are held living in the memory of God are held firmly for ever. Their love for us is remembered too, and their prayers for us, so that, living in the memory of God, they go on loving us and praying for us.

Perhaps even those moments when we feel like we have encountered them again are the moments when our memories and God’s memories overlap for a moment and those who live on in both are experienced by us in the power of God’s remembering love. They are neither mere memories nor anything like ghosts. Their lives are held securely in trust, living on in the life-giving memory of God, as they and we await the day of resurrection.

If this is true, then the idea of the communion of saints is a lot more than an obscure line in the home straight of the creed.

As we allow the saints who have gone before us to be held in our memories as well as in God’s, and we allow their voices to be remembered and heard, we will not only be greatly enriched by them, but we will be far more effective ambassadors for Christ, and as our reading said tonight, “with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we will know what is the hope to which Jesus has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.” Amen.