

SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Justorum animae – Byrd

At the heart of the Christian faith stands the mystery of the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. To be a believer means in some way to be drawn into his dying and resurrection. This faith in the victory of Christ has given to Christian people a sure confidence in the face of death and a confidence about their relationship with those who have died. Although the fact of death can never be minimised, its power is broken. Those who are in Christ remain united with one another in him, even when death has divided them. The fellowship is not broken for God is a God of the living, and those who have died live in Him. This is what we mean by the communion of saints.

While many people think of the saints as examples of ‘virtuous and godly living’, this hardly does justice to the biblical insight that in our pilgrimage through this world ‘we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses’. Sanctity is not so much about hero-worship as about accessibility; the saints are the real men and women of every age in whose lives we can glimpse heaven in our midst. They are our partners in prayer:

Before thy throne we daily meet
As joint-petitioners to thee;
In spirit each the other greet,
And shall again each other see.

(Richard Baxter)

This feeling that nothing is lost or in vain, but can somehow be made use of in God’s economy, that there is an underlying unity of which we are a part, is expressed in this next poem, “Not in Vain”

For not in vain are tears or petals shed;
They fall to feed their hungry mother’s pain.
The stuff of life is built upon the dead.

The chafing air we breathe, the earth we tread,
The spittle in thy mouth once fell as rain;
For not in vain are tears or petals shed.

The bones of monsters leach our daily bread,
The blood of kings are atoms in thy vein,
The stuff of life is built upon the dead.

If nightingales now sing where Ovid fled,
The poet chants within that sweet refrain,
For not in vain are tears and petals shed.

The sweat of death that soaks the fever bed
Shall drop by drop rejoin the living Main;
The stuff of life is built upon the dead.

The wheel of life is bound by silver thread,
And nothing ever lost is lost in vain.
For not in vain are tears or petals shed.
The stuff of life is built upon the dead.

Soho London , October 25 2002

Felix Dennis

The Rose – Bette Midler

The stuff of life is built upon the dead.

Another angle on this idea is found in a poem by Robert Southey, ‘My Days Among the Dead are passed.’ Southey lived in a large house in Keswick, Greta Hall, surrounded by over 14,000 books, and it was their musty presence that inspired this poem, with its strong statement of the powerful influence of those who have died, their idea and personalities, in the minds of the living – a kind of literary communion of saints.

My days among the Dead are passed;
Around me I behold,
Where'er these casual eyes are cast,
The mighty minds of old;
My never-failing friends are they,
With whom I converse day by day.

With them I take delight in weal,
And seek relief in woe;
And while I understand and feel
How much to them I owe,
My cheeks have often been bedewed
With tears of thoughtful gratitude.

My thoughts are with the Dead; with them
I live in long-past years,
Their virtues love, their faults condemn,
Partake their hopes and fears,
And from their lessons seek and find
Instruction with and humble mind.

My hopes are with the Dead; anon
My place with them will be,
And I with them shall travel on
Through all Futurity;
Yet leaving here a name, I trust,
That will not perish in the dust.

O quam gloriosum – Victoria

The Church has always asserted that this rich heritage is not destroyed or obliterated by death. The saints in each generation, joined to those who have gone before, become like a golden chain in which each saint is a separate link, united to the next by faith and works and love. So in God they form a single chain which cannot be broken.

The Church visible, or upon earth, lives in complete communion and unity with the whole body of the church, of which Christ is the head.

We know that when any one of us falls, he falls alone; but no one is saved alone. He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her and in union with all her other members. If anyone believes, he is in the communion of faith; if he loves, he is in the communion of love; if he prays, he is in the communion of prayer. No one, then, can rest his hope on his own prayers alone, but everyone who prays should ask for the intercession of the whole Church – not as though doubting the intercession of Christ, the one Advocate, but in the assurance that the whole Church ever prays for all her members. All the angels pray for us, the apostles, martyrs and patriarchs, and above them all, the Mother of our Lord; and this holy unity is the true life of the Church.

Alexis Khomiakov

Beati quorum via - Stanford

A reading from the book of Revelation

After this I looked
and there was a great multitude that no one could count,
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,
standing before the throne and before the Lamb,
robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

They cried out in a loud voice, saying
'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the
Lamb!'

and all the angels stood around the throne
and around the elders and the four living creatures,
and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God,
singing 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving
and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever!
Amen'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying,
'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?'

I said to him,
'Sir, you are the one that knows.'
Then as he said to me,
'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;
they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the
Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

Give us the wings of faith - Bullock