

All Saints' Day 2022

Today we observe All Saints' Day, a holy day which dates back to the Roman Empire; a day which has all but been forgotten by most modern Americans. So, what I propose to do today is to provide a little history, a little theology, and a little application as we consider the lasting significance of this ancient festival. We begin with a little history. Last week we celebrated the Reformation, but what I didn't mention to you was why Martin Luther chose October 31st of all days to post his 95 theses. Wittenberg, like most of German cities at this time, was architecturally structured around the church; the church building forming the hub from which all other buildings fanned outwards. As such, the Church was quiet literally the center of life, which residents and travelers were all but certain to pass by on any given day. Being the literal center of the city, the church itself served as a meeting place where ideas were exchanged, notices were posted, and all upcoming events were advertised. Of course, certain days for the church were more important than others, and the obligatory nature of Holy Days meant all townspeople would attend church service. Luther posted his 95 complaints on the Church door the night before All Saints' Day knowing full well that the next morning hundreds would flock to service and read his grievances; for they would be lined up to attend this holy feast just like their parents, and grandparents and great grandparents had done for hundreds of years before. All Saints Day, like Christmas or Easter, was a well-established holiday by Luther's time. Stretching back to the early 7th century, when Boniface IV reconsecrated the Pantheon of Rome to Mother Mary. And just like Easter and Christmas, he chose the date to replace a Roman holiday, co-opting the pagan "Feast of the Lamures", which was meant to appease the restless spirits of the dead with sacrifices and fasting. Boniface repurposed the pagan holiday to suit Christian theology. Now, instead of living in terror of these frightful ghouls and ghosts, Christians would honor all who had departed in faith. Henceforth, the day served as a positive witness, remembering the example of those who had lived holy lives. No longer was the day clouded in superstition, where evil spirits were thought to haunt the earth and possess the living, but it was a day of prayer and celebration for the cloud of witnesses; those who had fought the good fight of faith, and died in Christ.

Now a little theology. All Saints' Day really serves one purpose: to give annual witness to our belief in eternal life. What you believe about the afterlife determines how you live your present life. As Christians, we confess that we are not just destined to be born, to live, and to die, but that our true destinies lie somewhere beyond

this inevitable cycle of nature. We are more than just a bag of molecules floating aimlessly in a vast universe. We are created beings, formed by God's hand, set in motion by God's rhythm and move according to God's design. Life, far from being accidental or incidental, is intentional. All Saints' Day reminds us that life goes on, and that the life we now live is but a shadow of the more perfect reality to come. The ones who have gone before us know this firsthand, and we who live by faith eagerly await this firsthand knowledge.

Finally, a little application. What's our takeaway this morning? The celebration of All Saints' Day reinforces the wisdom of *perspective*. It reminds us that this earthly life of ours is fleeting, momentary, and far from permanent. The greatest lessons we learn from this life are—nothing lasts, everything changes, and inconsistency is life's most consistent pattern. Passing through life's stages, we are in a constant state of motion, which makes it hard to get our bearings. Remembering the dead brings a certain overarching stability to our lives. The dead remind us it's all be done before, said before, tried before. If we are fortunate, we have roughly 30,000 days upon this earth. How are we to spend those days? Day after day: rising, working, eating, sleeping, but to what end? Eventually, the absurdity of life breaks in upon us—the human need for meaning collides with the meaningless silence of the world. This nostalgia for permanency, this appetite for the absolute, illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. All Saints' Day gives the dead a voice, and these deathless voices speak to us from beyond the Great Beyond. And what do they say? They remind us that this world of ours is dying of its own vulgarity, stupidity, complacency, inhumanity, power and materialism; dying a slow death of the spirit, and the toxins released by its slow decay poison us, choking out the life force that animates us. We must fight against the defeatist desire to lay down under its weight. We must fight against the temptation to follow in kind and just give up. We must let faith fill us with a saving fierceness so that our days are not squandered and wasted. For to repeat the misery of life we see all around us is a crime against life. We combat this great crime with humility of Spirit, the mind of the Soul, the way of the Cross. Let the saints of old inspire us not to flinch before the Cross, but find therein the mystery *that* human life survives the death that feeds on it. For life is over in a blink, gone in a moment. But from the ashes we emerge, from the dust we arise, recommissioned by God Himself. Death comes for us all, but when it comes for us, I pray it finds us ready to make our grand exit from this tribulation into God's Kingdom, where we will join with all of God's elect in an everlasting chorus of Triumph. Amen.