

Sermon: Reformation, All Saints, All Souls
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
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On our church's calendar, today is Reformation Day; tomorrow is All Saints - and the day after tomorrow is All Souls Day. The color in church has turned to the blood of the martyrs.

The time of Holy Eucharist brings all this together. We celebrate it together with all the angels, all the saints, even with those friends and family members who passed away. And God's goodness for us is a free gift for those who look up to God in Jesus Christ with faith.

1 Seeing God

One day, we shall see God as he is. That is the explicit statement of John the Apostle in his first letter. We shall see God as he is.

Has there ever been a time when God was visible for humans? If you read the first pages of the Bible, you see God walking in the garden. The normal situation was intimacy and unity between mankind and God.

Our situation today, of pain and problems, sin and sorrow, our situation of God being far-off, is not normal.

If we would consider the problems of life as normal, we would be people without hope. But exactly because we believe our world is upside down, we can also have hope that God will one day straighten all things out again.

It began so well, in paradise, but almost from the beginning, man has been hiding for God. Adam and Eve tried to make themselves invisible, after they realized they had sinned. They were not pure enough.

It seems that the creation story begins by saying: God was visible, but mankind could not stand being seen by him, and could not stand seeing him, because we are too impure and God is perfect.

But, John says, one day, we will see him again.

Many saints and sages throughout the centuries have desired to see God. They have searched for what is, in fact, unattainable in this life. Our apostles are very clear about this.

Paul writes about God:

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.

Paul is not speaking here about God in his incarnation, after having put on human flesh for being able to make himself known to us. He speaks about God's inner being. God as God.

No-one can see him. But people who love God, against all logic, try to see Him anyway.

Take one of these mystics from the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa. He writes in a great book about Moses, that as Christians we seek to see God, we desire this - but when we try, we find darkness only, just as Moses found God in the darkness.

This is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.

This is why John the [Apostle] said that no one had ever seen God, declaring by this negation that the divine essence is beyond the reach [...] of men.

And so, when Moses had advanced in knowledge he declared that he saw God in the darkness, or in other words that he recognized that the Divinity is essentially that which transcends all knowledge and which no mind can apprehend.

So what did saint Gregory do? He knows God cannot be seen; he knows God is incomprehensible. But in spite of this, he searches. The desire is what counts, is what he tells us.

In this life, no-one can see God. But even our expectation about seeing God in eternity must maybe be tempered... Because if God's deep character is invisible, then even in eternity with our eyes we will not comprehend him.

We will be like him, in having no more sin. But we will always be creation, while God is the creator. We can only know and see him in as far as he comes down to us - in Jesus Christ. In his incarnated Son we can see him as He is.

The bible often speaks of God in human terms - the only words we possess are human words. So we speak of his hands, his eyes, his feet, his head. But we know, this is figurative language. He is not like us.

And the language of us seeing God, must be seen in the same light. The language of humans, and therefore the language of the Bible, can never describe how we will see and know God - precisely because he never stops being God and because we never stop being creatures.

Our mind can envision, our heart can be close to God, but seeing him with our physical eyes as he is, will even in eternity be impossible, it seems.

But be assured, all Biblical language hints at the greatness of eternity - the age to come, where we will be incredibly close to God, know him in an glorious but yet unimaginable manner.

2 Promise for us all

Some Christians already seem to have some real experience of the knowledge of God. You may have read the book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence (c. 1614 -1691).

Lawrence served in a Carmelite monastery. We remember him for the intimacy he expressed concerning his relationship to God. Despite his lowly position in life and in the priory, his character attracted many to him. He had a reputation for experiencing profound peace and visitors came to seek spiritual guidance from him.

Roman Catholics and Protestants alike enjoy his book on intimacy with God - people like John Wesley and A.W. Tozer for instance recommend reading it.

The man was holy, and he experienced great intimacy with God.

- > Did he know God so well because of his holiness?
- > Or was he more holy because of his intimacy with God?

In the context of the Reformation, this is an important question. In a sense, the message of the Reformation is counter-intuitive. We tend to think that when people are good, God will bless them with his knowledge.

Martin Luther proposed the opposite. God in his grace takes the initiative. He makes us good by his grace. He enters our life and that changes us.

The church of Rome at that time was overwhelmed with bewildering layers of folk religion.

The idea of knowing God was reserved for a small caste of monks and clergy, and the grace of God was sought with the help of the goodness of this spiritual elite; it could be obtained by asking them for it, even by paying for it.

The church had created a whole spiritual realm of saints and angels mediating between God and us, mere humans, normal people. Man could never come to God by himself through Jesus Christ alone, but was told that he needed the help of the church, of the saints, of the angels, or he would be utterly lost.

So Luther and later also John Calvin cut straight through all the dead wood, and said: God takes the initiative and by grace he saves ignorant, imperfect people - like you and me. We do not need saints or angels for this.

That was liberating, good news for normal people! Their salvation was no longer dependent on a rather corrupt system.

Jesus in his Sermon on the Mountain addressed the whole Jewish nation, all the normal people of his days. The Pharisees underlined that you had to follow every law of God meticulously, or you would end up outside the eternal kingdom of God.

You had to join their group in order to belong to the people of God, is what they taught. Thereby they made themselves the mediators of God's grace for the normal people.

Jesus liberated the normal people from this yoke. If you are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, if you hunger and thirst for righteousness, if you show mercy to people, if you are a peacemaker, if you are pure in heart, you are doing well with God.

If you are a normal Christian, with your imperfections but with your desire to serve God through Jesus Christ, then the Kingdom of God is for you.

If through your faith in Christ your heart is pure for God, and if you desire to also live with a pure heart - then be assured - you will see God. Together with all the saints. As you are one of them.

3 United with all who went before us - Together we know him

This seeing of God is not individualistic. It is something we will in eternity experience together with all believers. In his letter, John the Apostle says, "We shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." It is not about I - but about us.

Salvation is personal but not private. God has created himself a new people - a community. And in regard to seeing him in eternity, he addresses us as a community.

In the book of Revelation, John does the same. He describes in Rev 7 that a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, stands before the throne of God and before the Lamb of God.

They cry out together in a loud voice. In the heavenly liturgy there is no individualism. The church in heaven knows God together - just as we here on earth can only know God together with each other.

In heaven John shows us the saints, with white robes and palm branches in their hands. This includes all those beloved one's of us who passed away. They are in heaven before the throne of God, praising Him for his wisdom, and power and strength.

They already see God as he is. They already worship him with the angels and all heavenly beings.

And we do likewise here today. We worship him together; we know him together. St Paul said to the church in Ephesus:

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. (Eph 3:17-19)

Only with all the saints will we “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love.”

True knowledge of God is not found by yourself alone. It is found in community with all the saints. The saints who died long ago, and the saints beside you in the pew.

Conclusion

In church, especially when we celebrate Holy Eucharist, we celebrate communion with God and with each other.

All the saints from Adam, to Paul and John, to Pope Shenouda, and Mother Theresa, are present at this moment when heaven meets earth. And all the angels participate in our praise of God.

At Holy Communion, we look up at God - and we see him in the face of Jesus Christ. His gracious love is visible to us.

Your friends and relatives who passed away participate with us as well, as in heaven they celebrate before God.

And exactly at Holy Eucharist - heaven and earth meet. God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and the whole church on earth and in heaven meet together.

With all the saints and all the angels we come to God, to worship him, to receive his forgiveness, to know him better, to love him. And all this because God graciously took the initiative to offer himself to us.

So Reformation Day, All Saints Day and All Souls Day, are truly celebrated together when we kneel today for Holy Communion.

God graciously offers himself to us; and while we kneel, the saints, the angels, and all of our beloved ones, celebrate with us. It is amazing actually that we all fit in this small church!

Amen