

"A DOUBLE-DECKER BLESSING FOR SAINTS"

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Dear saints of St. John's, members and welcome guests:

Are you ready? For the sake of our relationships and civil discourse, November 9th cannot come soon enough. "Is this really the best we can do?" That is a question that many of us have uttered, or at least thought, in recent months. Sure, this elections cycle has created plenty of good fodder for Saturday Night Live skits, but no matter how you feel about either candidate right now, one thing we can probably all agree on is that we wish it would just be done. I, for one, am distressed that we have become so divided as a country, as friends, and as families. I have loved ones and so do many of you - people we know, care for, and respect - on either side of this election. And, while we have always been a country with our differences, this time feels different, more anger, and more likely to do harm to our interpersonal relationships and our country as well. We have moved beyond reason, ideals, and clean debating into an area where emotion and name calling rule the day and become more important than facts or well-researched opinion. It's like two overloaded buses both tugging sometimes in opposite directions and sometimes racing toward each other into a head long collision.

In contrast to this hectic and divisive scene, today's worship calmly celebrates unity of both people and purpose as it focuses attention on the remembrance of all the saints, both those of us still living, as well as that great cloud of witnesses who have died in the Lord. In this case we have, not two buses pulling in opposite directions or intent on colliding, but one bus. It's a double-decker. It has saints above on the upper deck and saints below on the lower deck but both going in the same direction, all with the same persuasion, all synchronized in word and worship. If you can visualize that double-decker bus cruising down life's interstate, you will see one big word painted on both sides and even on the roof. It doesn't say "Hillary" or "Trump" or any of those candidates. That word is painted there by our Lord himself and that word is 'blessed.' So enough about the election! Let's talk rather about a double-decker blessing for saints on this special observance.

Today's appointed Gospel lesson contains the opening lines of Jesus' familiar "Sermon on the Mount," known as the beatitudes. Jesus here ascribes a state of blessedness to various categories of disenfranchised people – the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the seekers of righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.

Now human reason says, Hey! Wait a minute! Jesus certainly got that wrong. In our traditional way of thinking the truly blessed are just the opposite. The rich and famous, the healthy and wealthy, those popular and in the news. Perhaps Jesus simply misspoke which is doubtful since he uses the same word in the same way ten times in a row. Or perhaps Jesus had a different definition of what it means to be truly blessed. I invite you to briefly explore with me that possibility.

When we research the usage and definition of that word '*blessed*', especially in the old testament, which was the scripture in Jesus time, we find a much different slant and interpretation. There a blessing is something a higher power or authority bestows upon someone or thing that then sets them or it aside for a special purpose and results in forming a special relationship between the blesser and the one blessed. In most instances, the one receiving the blessing then becomes a blessing to others. So, to be in a special relationship with God and to then share that relationship with others is to be blessed. Hopefully each of us present here fit into that category.

The best example of that is God's selection of Abraham to be his change agent to restore his broken relationship with his unblest creation and bestowing this gift: "... *I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.* Thus, those of Abraham's family and all those touched by faith in that extended family would also receive the blessing of that close relationship with God. Another example would be Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was especially touched by God and could sing in her Magnificat: "*From henceforth all generations will call me blessed.*"

Each of us here today, because of the faith we share, are recipients of that God-given blessing. For from the fruit of her womb came the One who was able to make that blessing restoration happen. Through his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, we now, holding firmly on that bestowed gift of grace, can enjoy the kind of close relationship with god that can withstand anything that might come our way – whether we be poor in spirit, mourners, or even persecuted.

On this celebration of all saints we have, in fact, been doubly blessed. When the younger of our two daughters was just learning to talk, it was our custom – and still is – to speak together a blessing over our meal. Not knowing the words or being able to speak them, after we said the "Amen," and wanting to participate, she came up with this phrase "blessed be blessed." I thought it was cute then; but lately I found it to be prophetic.

Because our first reading today is from the book of Revelation by John, the disciple of Jesus. The setting for this revelation happened when he was in the temple on "the Lord's day. Another way of saying that would be that he was in church on Sunday and this vision happened while the worship service was going on. So, one gets the impression of a double-decker worship service. One is occurring on the lower deck while a similar but much more impressive service of worship is occurring on the upper deck. John is transported in vision into a parallel dimension to see what that's like. He sees the saints above robed in white and singing hymns of praise: blessing and glory and wisdom, and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever." Followed by a thunderous, "Amen."

It almost blows one's mind to realize that while we, the blessed saints below, are sitting in our pews singing imperfectly hymns of praise to God, that our blessed loved ones who have moved to that upper deck are doing the exact same thing only in a much more glorious fashion. Together we are the "blessed be blessed" that double blessing that stems solely from our relationship with God established by our common faith.

I close with this thought. Double-decker applied to a bus can also be applied to a sandwich. What do we call a double-decker sandwich? A club. It's held together by a toothpick. So we, the saints below who have experienced the first death in our baptism parallel those saints above who have experience the second death,... but we are held together by the toothpick of our common faith and blessed by our firm and close relationship with God.

A very meaningful celebration of this day of all saints and, by the way, if you haven't already done so, join the "club." Amen