

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, BURNSVILLE, NC  
ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY, October 30, 1994  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
"Getting Into Heaven"

Today, let's think about "Getting into Heaven." Do you have a personal vision of what heaven is like? Do you think of it as a specific place where specific tasks will need to be done? Or do you think of heaven as a "Nirvana," a kind of "blessed nothingness" where the peacefulness will be such that you don't have to worry about anything? What do you think you will look like in heaven? How will you communicate with others, and who will the others be? Will they be loved ones, friends, lovers, children, parents, maybe even enemies? What will you know then that you don't know now? Will it make any difference? Will there be a judgement after your case is presented to the High Court? In which case, maybe all these questions are premature? Maybe the real question is: "Will I ever get into heaven?"

*\*Three orientals were killed in an accident and arrived at heaven's gate where St. Peter greeted them with his clip-board. "Wait a minute, you guys! Are you Christians?" "Oh no," they answered. "We are Buddhists!" "Oh for crying out loud," steamed Peter. "They screwed up downstairs again. Now what will I do? This is the Christian Gate. O.K. If any one of you can answer an important question about Christianity, I'll let you in this gate; otherwise you have to go back, die again, and go through the whole process! O.K. What is the meaning of Easter?" "Ah*

so.."said the first one, "Easter is fat old man, red suit, come down chimney with presents...?" "Nah - that's not even close to the real Christmas. Number two, how about you?" "Ah so...Easter is big fat bird, kill, cook bird, invite family for feast...?" "No, no, that's Thanksgiving! Number three - last chance!" "Ahhh...Easter...see cross on hill (yes, Yes!...) kill man on cross, name Jesus...(yes , Yes...) Jesus die, put in cave, he stay there three day (yes, Yes...!) on third day come out of cave (Yes! go on...) come out of cave, look up, look down, see shadow, mean six more weeks winter - go back in cave!

The point of all this is that whether or not we are or have been near the experience of death, it would be real smart for each one of us to take a few moments to consider our own personal vision of heaven; what is it like and how do I get there? I can think of no better time for the consideration of these issues than All Saints' Sunday, normally observed on the Sunday following All Saints' Day, November First. But because today is November 1<sup>st</sup>, we have hit it on the button!

The purpose of the celebration seems clear: to give thanks for the lives of those who have died before us. But the title we give them is confusing. We call them "Saints," whatever that means. It's confusing because "Saint" Paul says that we are all "saints," chosen people who have responded to the call to follow Christ Jesus. But we also have the development of

the Orthodox tradition of "αγίων", the "holy ones," those whom we judge to have lived an exemplary life in this plane of existence. In the western "catholic" tradition, there is a process by which these individuals are "elevated," or "canonized," into some hierarchy which sits around the throne of God for all eternity. More recent teachings suggest that a "prayer" to one of these individuals has two effects: our petition will be "mediated" to God more quickly and our desire will be granted and maybe even "effected more efficiently" by the Saint itself. Whatever you believe about all of that, the question remains, "How do I get into heaven?" The answer may not be as difficult as we think. The Scriptures are full of references. We heard some of them a few moments ago in our lessons for today. And without citing chapter and verse, many of us can remember the words of Jesus in several places, when he says: "*The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.*" Or, "*Blessed are those who... (do these things)... for their reward is great in heaven!*"

In other words, part of heaven is here and now, and part of heaven is "over there," wherever and whatever that is. Therefore, death is only a transition between life, and "life." Moreover, heaven is not something we can "get into"; we are already in it. But, it can be rejected! For example, listen to part of a letter quoted by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her last book, AIDS, The Ultimate Challenge. The letter is written to a man who has AIDS and is struggling with the "quality" vs. the "quantity" of his life. I

think it is a perfect description of how one "gets into" heaven.

"I have often wondered what is meant by the text '*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.*' Now in my later years I think I know. When I pass beyond the gate of death I will fall into the hands of the Living God, and I, only I will be responsible for the core of the person I bring into God's fields of praise.

If I have never seriously thought about my inner being, if I have lived always on the surface of things with no attention to the values that sustain our individual and common life, if I have made no effort to understand myself and the pattern of my reactions to people, if I have avoided any insight into the reasons for my behavior and my misbehavior, if I have lived so superficially that I have always been running, running, running away from the harsh problems and realities of primal suffering and social injustice, *then I shall know* what a fearful thing it is to fall into the hands of the Living God, because I will have nothing to bring God except a thin veil of confused images signifying nothing but wasted opportunities.

There is another level I have pondered, my friend, and it revolves around the problem of authority. If I have never accepted any authority greater than myself, if I have regularly put my own will ahead of any other consideration, if I have avoided a commitment to that which deserves my reverence and veneration, if I consistently preferred my own pleasures and fulfillment

to any other interest, if I have regarded speech as something to be used for personal gain and recognition regardless of truth, if I have used other people for my own gain and satisfaction with little thought for their rights and privileges, if I have betrayed the trust that others have reposed in me by breaking their confidences or by countless hypocrisies and double-talk, then when I pass the gate of death, *I shall know* what a fearful thing it is to fall into the hands of the Living God, because I will have nothing to bring God but an empty cup, a chalice God gave me at birth into which I have poured nothing worth saving.

We become the persons we are by the things to which we belong. If we have never belonged to anything but ourselves, then we have only empty shelves to bring to the Living God when the end comes. The nobler, the higher, the greater our commitments, the more and more we become the person God intended us to be. It took me a long time in life to learn in my inward being a truth I heard years and years ago. At last I well know that my being has but one supreme law: I want to belong to Christ as deeply, as utterly as possible, because I know it is only in belonging to Him that I have any hope of becoming the person He made me to be; without Him I have only an empty cup to bring to the Living God.

But we have not yet touched bottom. It is not the mind, nor the will, but the heart that counts in the end. If I harbor a resentment against anyone, if I look back on my life and blame someone else's inadequacy for my deprivations, if I persist in

thinking of myself as a victim, a helpless pawn moved about on the complicated chessboard of life's fortuitous circumstances and accidents, manipulated by those who should have known better, betrayed by those I loved and respected, perhaps even rejected by God, if I refuse the grace of for-giveness, forgiving and being forgiven, *then* when I come to the moment of ultimate and inescapable truth, naked and exposed to the full glare of divine reality, I shall (indeed) find the gates closed." [end quote]

In other words, the teaching of this letter, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, and perhaps the *single main point* of all the teachings of Jesus, is not how you "get into" heaven, but rather how you can "get out." If there is a "hell" that would certainly be another way of looking at it! Is it not possible that the Saints are where they are simply because they "stayed in," finished their business, learned what it was that they were supposed to learn, lived exemplary lives, and "passed through" when it came their time? In short, is it not possible that we, the "saints" of our own time, are already "into" heaven, and whether or not we stay there is a matter of our own choice!? Is it not possible that we are the chosen people of the Living God, and that "falling into His hands" was exactly what God had in mind?

What do you think? Is it worth "getting into heaven?"