

3 November 2002
The Festival of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

Jesu Juva

“We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.”

Text: Matthew 5:1-12 (Isaiah 26; Rev. 21-22)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the opening hymn this evening we sang, “**We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.**” Oh how true that is. And you don’t have to look far to see the struggles.

First of all we struggle in our lives; mightily; and in many and various ways. We struggle with sin, doing that which we know we should not do, and not doing that which we know we should be doing. We struggle with diseases and sickness of the body and of the mind. We struggle with getting old and not being able to do what we used to be able to do. We struggle with our emotions and feelings – our anger and desire for vengeance; our fear and anxiety; our sadness and sorrow. We struggle with family disputes, and fights with friends and co-workers. We struggle with the direction we are going in life, and should we change, and how we should change. . . . We do struggle, and doesn’t it often seem that we do so “*feebly!*” That our struggle is a losing battle. That we have no strength when compared to our enemies. That try as we might, our struggles do sometimes seem to get the best of us.

But we do not only struggle in our lives, we also struggle in the Church, and again, in many and various ways. We struggle with false teaching, both within our church and with Christians in other churches who disagree with us. We struggle with how our fractured church affects our outreach and witness to the world. We struggle with our fellow Christians, with personality disputes, pet peeves, and sins against us. We struggle with our faith, when things don’t seem to be working out; when it seems as if God doesn’t see, or doesn’t care; when it seems as if we are being left alone to “twist in the wind.” We struggle with our worship, with hymns that may be difficult to sing, when the preaching is not as good as we want, when our neighbor is singing off key. We struggle with all that we do not understand, and all the questions we wish we had answers to. . . . We do struggle, and doesn’t it often seem that we do so “*feebly!*” And that our struggles never seem to have an end, and that try as we might, our struggles do sometimes seem to get the best of us.

But there is another side to this picture, for while **“we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.”** And who are they who now in glory shine but the ones who used to be with us here, in the struggles of this life, in the world and in the Church. For them, the struggle is now ended. In Christ they lived and in Christ they died, and now by grace through faith they have received their rest and their peace. And what a picture we have been given of that rest, both in our Old Testament and Epistle readings for today, and in other parts of the Scriptures! For them, there is no more struggle with sin. There is no more sadness and sorrow. There is only holiness and perfection. For them there is no more fear, no doubt, no uncertainty. There is no need, no hunger or thirst. There is perfection and abundance. For them there is no struggle with worship, for they have joined the perfect worship of the *“angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”* around **“the throne of God and of the Lamb.”** The perfect song of the angelic choir, the feast of the Lord at His Table. No tears, only joy. . . . It is a picture so glorious that it is almost – *almost* beyond belief.

“We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.” Oh how true that is.

But on this All Saints Day, one of the things that we need to remember is that all that I have just been describing is not a picture of two different realities! As different as they may seem, and as stark the difference between *our* struggles now and *their* rest in glory, there are not two separate realities here, but one reality. For just as in the Trinity there are not three lords, but one Lord; and just as in the Incarnation there are not two christs, but one Christ; so also for us there are not two lives – one that we live here and another that we will live there – but one life. And there are not two churches, but one Church, one body of Christ. Or as St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **“There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”**

And that is indeed what we sang in the opening hymn, if we read on with the words. **“We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; Yet all are one within your great design.”** Or, as the phrasing of the older hymnal put it: **“Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.”** . . . And so what is the difference? Or, how do we then explain the difference between we who are feebly struggling, and they who in glory shine? It is not that they are blessed and we are not. It is not that they have glory and we do not. It is not that they have the presence of God and we do not. No, the difference is simply this: as long as we live in this world, we must live under the cross.

Now, that is often said and repeated in the Church, but what does that mean? It means that the reality of who we are, and what we have, and what we have been given in Christ,

is **hidden** in this world. It is hidden under the cross. It is hidden under suffering and pain. But when we are transferred – transferred from this Church Militant on earth to the Church Triumphant in Heaven, what we are shall be **seen**. It will be no longer hidden under the forms of this world, but we shall see and be seen, know and be known, as who we really are – the redeemed of Christ, saints, a host arrayed in white, whose sin and guilt have been washed away in the blood of the Lamb. . . . But it is important to know that all of that is already ours and has already been given to us in our Saviour, even though it may not always seem like it. Even though it is hidden to our eyes in this world. Even though we are “feebly struggling” in this world.

And it was the Holy Gospel for today that made that point. For there we heard once again who is blessed. And it sounds like a paradox. For it is precisely those who do not seem blessed that are called “blessed!” The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who use up and give up themselves for others, those who are persecuted because of Christ, those who are reviled and spoken evil of because of Christ. ***“Blessed are you! Rejoice and be glad!”*** . . . How? Why? Because the gifts and the glory and the blessing of Christ has already been given to you. For ***“yours is the kingdom of Heaven; yours is the inheritance; yours is the mercy; yours is the comfort; yours is the sonship.”*** All this is already yours, although for now, in this world, it is hidden. Hidden under the cross. Hidden under suffering and pain. Hidden under the struggle.

But faith knows and sees the reality. That although we do struggle with sin in this world, and are at one and the same time simultaneously saint and sinner, that we are already among the host arrayed in white, for our sins have been washed away in the blood of the Lamb in Holy Baptism and Holy Absolution. . . . Faith knows that we have already been given a seat at the Table of our Lord, and have enjoyed a foretaste of the feast to come in Holy Communion. Not that it is here a different feast, but it is the one and the same feast at which we are welcomed. . . . Faith knows that we already worship with the *“angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven,”* for on the other side of this same Table of the Lord are all the saints who have gone before us. And so we know that if we desire to be with our loved ones who have gone before us, it is not in the cemetery that that takes place, but here, for we are never so close to them as we are here at this Table. . . . And faith knows that we are blessed, even in suffering, in struggle, under the cross. For the reality of the cross was hidden to the world as well. For to those who do not believe, the cross was simply the execution of yet another Jewish rebel; the administration of Roman justice. But faith sees and knows the reality. That hidden under a seemingly ordinary execution was the reconciliation, the bringing back together again of God and man, in Jesus Christ. That His blood was not mere human blood, but the blood of God. That His death was no mere human death, but the death of God for us. That His sacrifice

was no mere sacrifice, but the once and for all perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world. And in that suffering, in that struggle, was blessing, was glory, was salvation, was love and hope, was God Himself. . . . He had been there all along, but had to remain hidden, under the shroud of sin and death for us.

But what now remains hidden to our eyes here and now will all one day for us be visible, when we are raised, when we join our brothers and sisters in Christ in glory. And the blessing that is already ours we will see. The glory that is already ours we will see. The Christ that is already ours we will see. For the cross will be removed, its purpose in you complete, and your life in the Church Triumphant begun!

“We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.”

So dear brothers and sisters in Christ, make sure that in looking forward to Heaven you do not lose sight of our present reality – that the same Lord who is there for them is also here for us, with His same grace and blessing. Yes, **“we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.”** The cross must come before the glory. But **“Blessed are you”** for you are saints, dearly loved, even now. Even in the struggle. Even in suffering. And although that reality may sometimes be hard to see, hidden here and now under the cross, it is nonetheless true, for you and I and **“For All the Saints!”**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.