

## All Saints

“You can’t get there from here.” I still remember the first time I ever heard that phrase in earnest. You can’t get there from here. I was a stockbroker, a city slicker from Memphis. I thought I was really savvy by driving 90 miles south into rural north Mississippi where there was a collection of textile mills. I was sure I could drive in, flash my Mississippi State charm, and drive away with all the money. But there I was at a one pump filling station and bait store, completely lost. And to make matters worse, the owner of station had just pronounced in his most flippant manner that, “You can’t get there from here.” Did he have a map? (Mine was not detailed enough.) “Nope”, he said, “Dun sold out.” Could I look at one of his and just take down some directions? “Nope, don’t need one. I live here.” And that was the end of it. He knew the landscape, and he didn’t need a map.

Knowing the landscape makes all the difference on a trip. If you don’t know where you are going, how can you know the way? If you don’t know the landmarks, how will you know when you have arrived? This is as true for our vacation plans as it is for our plans for eternity. For

our lives here on earth in these bodies is most certainly a journey, or rather a pilgrimage. For we have been called to follow the Savior, following him wherever he leads. So we, like Abraham, have been called to a greater land, and we are wanderers until we see the promise.

The Medieval Church had developed a particular way of thinking about the terrain. The Church was thought of in three different stages: militant, triumphant and expectant. The Church militant was the one struggling here on earth. The Church triumphant was the elect who were in Heaven. The Church expectant was that body of Christians who had died and were in the process of attaining Heaven.

The journey that men and women were on in this life had two potential and diametrically opposed destinations in the next: Heaven and Hell. Hell was the end of the pagan, the unbaptized and those that had repudiated the Christian faith. This was an eternal destination, without hope for rehabilitation.

But Heaven, Heaven was the abode of the Saints. Here the Angels, Patriarchs and prophets, along with all the company of Heaven basked in the glory of the Beatific Vision, that is the sight of the Holy, Blessed and Undivided Trinity. This is the Church Triumphant.

There were two ways of getting there: the Express Train and the Local Line. The Express Train departed this life immediately at death and passed immediately to the presence of God. It was occupied by those that we normally think of when we use the word “Saint”: apostles, martyrs, monastics and doctors of the Church. I pause here only to add that the greatest in this galaxy, Mary, the Mother of God, was thought not to have died at all and thereby did not submit to even this Express Train, but passed like Elijah into the Heavenly courts.

But if one was not to ride upon the Express Train, because of some deficiency caused by the weight of sin upon one’s soul, but had died in the faith of the Church, then that one could expect to travel to the heavenlies by a slower and more roundabout route. These common Christians were saints in the making. They had bumps and bruises and imperfections, which they had incurred in their journey through

the snares and temptations of this life. They needed some tidying up before they arrive in the presence of Almighty God. And so they endured a time of purging or purifying in a place rightfully called Purgatory. This is the Church Expectant.

We must be clear at this point that Purgatory was not the same thing as Hell. The imagined torments of those places were often quite similar, but Purgatory was a place reserved exclusively for Christians, or if you like, saints in the making. There was no trapdoor that might accidentally fly open and let someone fall into the Devil's realm below. No, all the occupants of Purgatory had every hope of the Beatific Vision. It simply took some longer than others to catch sight of it.

And how did one get there from here? With a little help from your friends. The Saints were close to God. They had his attention. If you prayed to them they were thought to be able to bring the Lord's mercy to bear as you struggled through your time of purging. And the Saints were not your only avenue of assistance. Your friends and family, still on earth, offered prayers and funded masses to ease your time in

Purgatory and hasten the day that you might enter into the precincts of Heaven.

So this is the Medieval Landscape: the winding journey from Earth to Heaven, all the while Saints and angels in Heaven assisting the Christian faithful to become themselves, Saints. The Christian hope was to go to Heaven when they died with as little time in Purgatory in the interim.

But it is at this very point that I wish to question this venerable tradition. What is the Christian hope? Is it to go to Heaven when we die? If by “Heaven” you mean some kind of disembodied, spiritual existence in which you play harps and sit on clouds for all eternity, then I would say that you are mistaken, or at least shortsighted. As far as the Scriptures are concerned the Christian hope is full-blooded, full-bodied RESURRECTION! Hear the Apostle John, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know him. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall

appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” Hear Paul, “Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” My friends, our eternal hope is not a ghostly inheritance, even if it would be in the presence of God for all eternity! Instead, it is that we might be re clothed with bodies, even the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But if this is true, my friends, and our final hope is not pie in the sky by and by, but rather the General Resurrection, then what can we say of the Christian and faithful departed? We must say that they all, great and small together, wait expectantly for the fullness of all things. They all, apostles and martyrs, along with the anonymous departed await the Resurrection and Jesus’ gift to them which is a body that shall never pass away. They all wait, they all rest, they all hope. There is no distinction; there is no purgatory, for they are all saints.

“What!”, you say, “no distinction?” Hear the words of Paul, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to

them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Oh, dear friends, we proclaim that we believe in the communion of saints! Who are they? They are those who have been redeemed by the death and resurrection of God's only son, Jesus. These saints are those who have communion with Christ himself, because he has made them his own. He has bought them with his own priceless blood! Would you be in this auspicious company? Would you have communion with the saints? Then you must turn your gaze from them and look upon the one in whom they placed all their trust. For they would be ashamed of us if we thought we could come into Christ's presence by venerating his saintly servants. You can't get there from here. Instead, love the Savior, for he is the hope of all the saints. AMEN.