

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Hartford, Connecticut

All Saints' Sunday (November 4, 2007)
Ephesians 1:11-23 Luke 6:20-31

The Reverend Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick

LIVING THE LIFE OF A SAINT

This is, of course, the Sunday immediately after All Saints' Day. It is a rather awesome day in our liturgical calendar. And I use the word "awe" in two senses: a day to fill us with awe at the lives of the best-known saints who have preceded us, and a day that is even awe-ful because it can be very intimidating to those of us not in the pantheon of recognized saints. In Jesus' words to the crowd in this morning's well-known gospel we have a long list of the demanding virtues expected of those who would follow him into sainthood, including a willingness to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness and suffer revilement and defamation.

These seem like pretty high standards to meet if one is to become a saint and be able to stand before God at the last day with one's robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. It's tough, hearing all this, not to feel somewhat intimidated. And on this day we are going to baptize children into the communion of the saints and expect them to hear and inwardly digest (at first through parents and godparents, and later, on their own), the words regarding sainthood that we have all just heard. That's a pretty heavy burden to lay on anyone.

Now one characteristic that many of our earliest saints have in common is that they were the victims of persecution when Christians were truly under siege. In the early centuries thousands of Christians risked bloody deaths for their refusal to accept any other God but the God of Jesus. Now I'm sure none of us knows just how *we* would have responded to the challenge to our faith had we lived in those times under Roman law when being a Christian was a capital offense. But what's intimidating about these Biblical stories today is that we *aren't* being persecuted for our faith; no one is reviling us or bearing false witness against us just because we are Christians, though some among us this morning, such as the Karen people of Burma, do know what it is like to be persecuted for their faith. But for most of us in a nation where the majority overwhelmingly identify themselves as Christian and where people get elected because the voters apparently feel that if candidates declare themselves to be Christian they can do no wrong, it is hard to say that Christianity is under siege in America. So what would it mean for us in this time and place to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness?

The first thing we have to say is that being a saint in these circumstances is often going to be rather invisible and unremarkable. And unfortunately most of the canonized saints seem, at least in retrospect, somewhat on the unusual side: they were chiefly martyrs, monastics, popes, theologians, or nuns. Very few were married people with jobs simply trying to do the best they could in an everyday world. And none, as far as I know, was a politician or business man.

Fortunately, however, we have a hymn, "I sing a song of the saints of God," which reminds us that we *can* meet saints in school, on the street, in the store, at the office, in church, or in the house next door. So maybe there is hope for those of us who aren't famous and are not likely to become famous. Being a saint in God's eyes requires only that we dedicate our lives to doing what is right and good even when we aren't in sacred space like a church or a monastery. The life of a saint today is going to take place in the

world of everyday life. And that life, for most of us, is messy, complicated, ambiguous, and not particularly sacred. To live the life of a saint in such a world, to incarnate the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, means advocating for those things that will bring justice to the truly poor and oppressed. It does not mean secluding ourselves from the contexts of racial and economic justice in order to develop our own private spirituality in isolation from the world. It is crystal clear that the Biblical imperative, for *all* times and places, is for relieving the oppression of those who are being treated unjustly. And that means, for example, the people of Darfur who are the victims of genocide. It means the poor in our cities and countryside, over 40 million of whom have no health insurance, which is a kind of silent genocide. It means addressing those who are suffering from HIV/AIDS. It means treating immigrants and foreigners with compassion and mercy, not with the cold hand of the law. It means, in short, acting in whatever ways we can in the particular contexts in which we find ourselves according to the Biblical principles of love and justice. Such action will not require us to walk into the lion's den; it will not normally require us to sacrifice our homes or families. But it will require us to act on our moral convictions in the one arena in which our voices can be heard and the policies of our state and nation can be shaped: in the political and economic arenas. The people who work in these arenas are often the ones who do receive the brunt of revilement and scorn. The worlds of politics and business may seem very strange arenas for contemporary saints, but saints are those who do the will of God in the ways that make the most difference to those we are called to serve. And entering this arena is fully in accord with the Constitutional principle that we are free to practice our religious convictions wherever they take us without fear of state control.

At its most recent general convention last year, the Episcopal Church signed on to what is called "ONE: The Campaign to Make Poverty History." It is grounded in the conviction that in a country that has made citizen participation a hallmark of democracy, voting in elections can well be the act of a saint who wants to give practical weight to the moral imperative of doing the works of righteousness and peacemaking. Politics, despite the negative connotations and revilement it presently receives, is the one place where the people of a free society can come together to decide on policies and laws that, ideally, strengthen the common good and serve the common welfare. As odd it might sound, therefore, I think what we need are more political and economic saints, including both those who serve in public office as well as those who work for and support them. Unless we can cure poverty or provide access to quality health care or decent education *solely* through personal charity (and the evidence suggests that this is not possible given the complexities of a society of 300 million people), then the only way to do the work for the poor that God has given us to do is through some combination of personal action, public policy, and economic and business decisions. In keeping, therefore, with the Episcopal Church's commitment to eradicating extreme poverty, I would urge that we each consider how we will use the opportunity for sainthood in the political and economic processes, whether it be in the voting booth, in the corporate office, on the plant floor, in the cubicles of middle management, or in our choices about what to consume. I would urge us all to ponder the moral principles that constitute our Christian faith and exercise our electoral prerogative, help to shape public policy, and vote our conscience when the opportunity to do so presents itself in our town or state or nation. I am not suggesting that we vote just for those candidates who exploit the rhetoric of Christianity. But there are and will be political issues and candidates on the ballots over the next year that can make a difference in establishing justice, righteousness, and peacemaking: these are issues in which the power and might of our nation, if used appropriately, can make a significant difference in the lives of those both at home and abroad who are suffering from the ravages of war, a lack of food, housing, medical care and education, and unjust discrimination. Think

about these issues and then, according to your conscience as it is informed by the principles and virtues of the saints of the past, choose how you will use some of your time over the next months and year to make your voice public, to exercise your franchise in the political system and in the markets that are the foundation of our economy. This may well be the most saintly thing you do this year even if your particular contribution is invisible to the public at large. But the collective weight of private, invisible, but truly saintly and justice-oriented actions in the political process and in business and economic decisions might well mean the difference between life and death for millions of our fellow human beings around the globe.

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