

## ALL SAINTS, Nov. 6, 2016, Year C

"But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever." (Daniel. 7:18)

- As we learned last year, [this feast of All Saints has roots in the commemoration of early Christian martyrs](#). We live in an age when Jews and Christians around the world once again face persecution and martyrdom. Given this, All Saints remains a very important feast. It's not only our anxiety about a spill-over from religious and political conflict in the Middle East. We are also concerned about *our* political leadership, the degraded state of our public conversation, and the prospects for our own religious freedom. But, [there is a deeper source of our unease, which erodes our ability to hope](#).
- Let me describe how we *recognize* it. The culture around us is no longer confident that *real* and identifiable [beauty](#) exists, but *only* differing styles of [taste](#). We don't think we can join others in saying that there are *genuine* ethical [goods](#); leaving us with only personal [preferences](#). And, we no longer believe in *commonly-held* [truth](#), and so *all we have left* are varying [opinions](#). [Relativism](#) permeates all of this. As a result, and quite apart from *external* threats, we could lose our culture and our possibility for society. Because *both culture and society* depend upon having a [common](#) language, having [shared](#) principles, and a regard for [relationships](#) when we communicate with others. This is why we are so much more prone to *arguing* than agreeing, and to *tearing each other down* than building each other up. *Culture vanishes* when we no longer have things for which, [together](#), we are willing to *live and die*.
- [Only one thing can really keep us together](#). We need to recover a shared belief that [what is true](#), [what is good](#) and [what is beautiful](#) are *real* things! And, that they are anchored in something *deeper*, and *more lasting*, than our ability to agree with one another. [We need to recover our confidence that these things have a foundation in God](#), and in the revelation the One who is the Creator of the universe.
- [This is why the feast of All Saints could not have come at a better time](#). For it fits our current need, *perfectly*. To see how and why this is so, I invite you to join

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me in reflecting on Marc Chagall's great painting, *Exodus*, a copy of which I have included with your worship bulletin.

- If you know anything about Chagall, you know he chose to work with images associated with his forebears' Judaism, and with cultural motifs gleaned from his Russian childhood. Viewers are often surprised that *Chagall so frequently portrayed a crucified figure*, whom Christians readily identify as the hero of the Gospels. Yet, as we reflect on this central New Testament image, we notice how early Christian writers consistently wanted to anchor their theology in the words, images and stories of the Old Testament.
- In particular, *the 'suffering servant' passages* from Isaiah were seen as prophetic prototypes for the New Testament messiah.<sup>1</sup> These texts may refer to the *vocation of the prophet* himself. But *these passages, which we associate with Holy Week, also refer to the vocation of Israel*. For Israel, as the nation-servant of God, was destined to *suffer in a redemptive way, on behalf of the larger world in which God's people were called*. The people of biblical Israel were *no more successful* at living out this vocation *than we are*. Yet, as people who are *also* of the Covenant, we have been grafted like a new branch into the older vine of Israel, and so we share Israel's vocation. Therefore, *a figure portrayed as suffering on a cross, especially one clad in Jewish garments, has a significance that transcends the New Testament messiah*. As Isaiah's words and Chagall's art suggest, such a figure can meaningfully be viewed as God's 'suffering servant,' *both the prophet, and the servant-nation Israel*. Clearly, our loving God *identifies with this vocation, and shares it* with us.
- Notice how Chagall, *a religious-agnostic*, chose to employ such symbolic *biblical imagery*. He selected these images at a time when our modern world turned on Jews with a particular vengeance, in the horrific events of the Holocaust. Chagall's famous 1938 painting, *White Crucifixion*, now in Chicago, is a case in point.<sup>2</sup> Like the *Exodus* painting, *Chagall likely intended not only to highlight the suffering of Jews, in a way that Christians would notice*. But also to

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*prick the conscience* of Christians who either *participated in* that unfolding evil, or *who stood by* and let it happen.

- And, so, we have an image of the Exodus, for All Saints! Look sensitively at Chagall's painting. We see how it both *does, and does not, represent* a biblical event. *Initially*, we see a portrayal of a white-gowned woman who *may* represent Israel as the Old Testament *Bride of God*. And, we see a depiction of *Moses on Sainai*, carrying the holy 'tablets.' Yet, symbolically and mystically, Chagall also explores the *enduring* meaning of so many texts. Like the Hassidic Judaism of his own past, many Christians follow him in perceiving an abiding significance within biblical events and images. Here are three small examples.
- Instead of evoking the plagues accompanying Israel's departure from Egypt, we see *fire burning* the villages of Chagall's youth, in Russian pogroms against the Jews. We notice what seem to be *Hanukah candles*, held in the hands of a woman, just below the great crucified figure at the center. And, we observe what may be a rabbi in the foreground, protecting the sacred scroll of *the Torah* in the embrace of his arms. As in the biblical Exodus, *God's people have struggled to survive* death-causing persecution; have endeavored to *preserve* vestiges of God's light; and continue to *keep holy* God's declared Word.
- But at the heart of this painting, and at the heart of this great feast of All Saints, is *not human effort or persistence*, as important as these are. *At the heart of this painting, and at the heart of this feast is God's own willingness to enter, and be one with, the painful circumstances of God's people.* At the heart of *Israel's vocation, and therefore* at the heart of the *Church's vocation*, is *God's own willingness to identify with his people ~ with people like the wanderer, Abram; like the second-born, Jacob; like the over-looked younger son, Joseph, and later David; and especially, to be so close to the orphan, and then criminally-implicated, Moses. At the heart of Israel's vocation and that of the Church, was and is the suffering servant's willingness to accept abuse at the hands of others.* This was because of an enduring, abiding and eventually world-confounding

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belief, that God's sovereignty over the things of this world, and over the events of history, is ultimate and prevailing.

- God's first and great Covenant people have *endured* to this day, despite the adversity of human history. If *they* could, then *we, who have been grafted by grace into the legacy of that Covenant, can not only endure. Like them, we can also flourish!* We can flourish in the reality that *God's suffering servant, who has always been at the heart of the world, still manifests God's servant-vocation.* Through Baptism, we have been joined to the people of the Exodus. By this, we share a life-giving vocation *to be servants, servants who—in God's mysterious Providence—may be called to suffer!* Our Lord Jesus fulfilled this vocation, and shares it with us. This is beautifully expressed in one of our collects for mission: *(Please turn with me to BCP:101)*
- "Lord Jesus Christ, *you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace:* So clothe us in your Spirit that *we, reaching forth our hands in love,* may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name."<sup>3</sup>

From Luke 6:20-31:

‘Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”



Marc Chagall, *Exodus* (1952-66)

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> These passages in Isaiah are commonly recognized as the four passages found in chapters 42, 49, 50 and 52-3 {42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13~53:12. some add 61:1-3, later quoted in Luke 4:18ff}.

<sup>2</sup> The Chicago *White Crucifixion* is a painting to which we might devote sustained attention on a future Good Friday.

<sup>3</sup> The third collect for mission, in Morning Prayer (BCP:101).