

Beholding People in Light of Christ

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Acts 4:5-14, Psalm 98, 1 John 1:1-2:2, Luke 24:36-49

“The early Christians realized that in order to become the temple of the Holy Spirit they must ascend to heaven where Christ has ascended,” writes Alexander Schmemmann. He is not talking about some secret spiritual method, but simply the weekly gathering of the faithful in worship, prayer, and sacrament. He continues, “For there—in heaven—they were immersed in the new life of the Kingdom; and when, after this “liturgy of ascension,” they returned into the world, their faces reflected the light, the “joy and peace” of that Kingdom and they were truly its witnesses. They brought no programs and no theories; but wherever they went, the seeds of the Kingdom sprouted, faith was kindled, life was transfigured, things impossible were made possible. They were witnesses, and when they were asked, “Whence shines this light, where is the source of this power?” they knew what to answer and where to lead men.”

We also are called as witnesses. Church is ecclesia, literally the “called out ones.” We are called out and up in the presence of the Risen Christ. The pinnacle of this encounter is the gathering of the saints in worship each week around the Risen Christ. The liturgy focuses our whole body, all five senses, upon the glory of the Risen Lord. In Schmemmann’s words, we go out from this place as a eucharistic people bringing the bread of Christ to the world through our words and deeds.

Today I want to return briefly to looking back as we consider saints of old, and I also want to think about looking out beyond ourselves to people around us both friend and enemy.

Our faith takes shape in a community, but it also takes shape within our own daily lives. A quick read of Acts and the Epistles reveals people speaking in terms of a personal encounter with the Lord. In our readings today, the letter from John speaks of a fellowship with Triune God. He is bearing witness to His personal encounter with the Lord. At the same time, he is calling the people into an abiding relationship with the Lord. This fellowship with the Lord cannot be separated from loving fellowship with one another. The two are bound together.

### **Remembering Saints**

The book of Acts tells the story of the earliest Christians as they faced persecution, proclaimed the Gospel, experience God’s miracles, and proclaimed Jesus Christ. As we read through the book, we see the boldness of Peter and the passion of Paul. But we also see Philip talking one on one with a Eunuch. We see people gathering to pray for Peter. We see Barnabas encouraging Paul and then continuing to disciples John Mark even after Paul refuses to work with him. We see a diverse community of saints in various towns learning to walk out their faith. These stories give us a picture of the living community of saints who bear witness to Christ publicly and privately by eating together and helping meet one another’s needs.

In remembering these stories, we are learning the ways in which Christ leads and works through His people. Hebrews 11 gives us a picture of saints of old, of faith Hebrews whose stories are

bound up with our stories. It teaches us to read these ancient stories in light of Christ and of the great communion of God's people.

We can extend this pattern across church history. When I first started serving at Apostles Anglican, I was asked to help lead a weekly healing service that focused on a saint. This was a completely new practice for me. While I enjoyed Christ biography, the idea of rehearsing saint stories in worship seemed a bit odd. I was expecting to read a bunch of historiographies with saints beginning to fast and serve the Lord even as infants.

Instead, many saint stories tell how regular individuals worked out their faith in a wide range of circumstances: some were enslaved, and others were wealthy. Some were adventurous missionaries and others lived in one room their entire lives. The Anglican calendar of saints follows the lives of Christians from all different walks of life and in all different church denominations.

Conducting this weekly service taught me to appreciate the richness of remembering Christians from days gone by. As I began to study these lives and read about these Christians in light of Scripture, I began to see an ongoing testimony to the faithfulness of the Risen Christ in every age.

I would encourage all of us to read the stories of God's people across the ages. There are some wonderful websites and books that can help. Each day Christian History Institute offers a snapshot of Christians who were born, served or died on each day (<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/today>). "Holy Women, Holy Men" (<https://diobeth.typepad.com/files/holy-women-holy-men.pdf>) is both a book and a website that lists a wide range of important Christians throughout history. A regular devotional habit of meditating on Christians from the past can help us to see how Christ has worked and continues to work in all sorts of circumstances.

It is also a valuable habit of reading the writings of Christians from past ages. It is easy to read and think within the limits of our particular era. At the same time, we can become guilty of believing or particular glimpse of life in this specific age represents the whole, but humans have limited vision in any age. It can enrich our faith to consider the challenges and thoughts of those from other ages, other times. Writings from other ages may answer challenges we are currently facing or at least help us to frame our current response. They often help expose some of our own blindspots and give us a greater appreciation for the depths of truth.

Maximus the Confessor wrote in the seventh century about love and faith and God's good creation. His sentences on love have challenged me personally while also introducing me to an ancient pattern of remembering. He writes four centuries on love. Each century contains one hundred sentences. These sentences were his attempt to remember the various ways people spoke about love from that century. Thus his little book is a primer for remembering various ways of cultivating love over the previous four hundred years. Here are some of his treasures:

*Who sees a trace of hate in his own heart, for any fault soever, towards any man soever, is quite alien from charity towards God; because charity towards God in no way suffers hate towards man.*<sup>1</sup>

*Happy the man who is able to love all men equally.*<sup>2</sup>

*When you are insulted by someone or made of no account in some affair, then beware of angry thoughts lest by grief they remove you from charity and place you in the region of hate.*<sup>3</sup>

*As memory of fire does not warm the body, so faith without charity does not effect the illumination of knowledge in the soul.*<sup>4</sup>

Meditating upon great literature has also been another way, I've sensed the presence of the Lord. Daniel Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is a wonderful adventure and a beautiful conversion story at the same time. There are a variety of excellent books to help us become better, more thoughtful readers. I might suggest one recent book by Karen Swallow Prior, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*.

### **Remembering Family and Friends**

Just as it is easy to remember our own story wrongly, I would suggest it is easy to remember people wrongly. We may focus only their traits or habits that irritate us. Paul models a way of encouraging or blessing various Christian communities even when he is about to challenge some of their practices.

He tells the saints at Ephesus that he gives thanks for them and remembers them in his prayers. Even as Paul is going to challenge the Corinthians for their divisions and pride, he says that he gives thanks for them. In his second letter, he speaks of God's comfort in our afflictions (that is both Paul's afflictions and their afflictions). As he remembers God's people, he is entering into their burdens in prayer, and trusts that Christ will meet him and them in that place of suffering.

Paul also carries the burden of those who are trusting in their ritual observances over Christ. Though he rebukes the Galatians for falling from grace, he also bears the burden of their true conversion in his heart. When sharing this burden, Paul uses imagery of pregnancy and childbirth. He writes,

“My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.” (Galatians 4:19-20)

As we cultivate the happen of remembering one another in light of Christ, we carry one another's burdens. Instead of turning from those who offend us, we seek to love through the cross of

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<sup>1</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *St. Maximus the Confessor: The Ascetic Life, The Four Centuries on Charity*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. Polycarp Sherwood, vol. 21, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 1955), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 141.

Christ. As we cultivate this pattern of remembering and praying and learning to love one another rightly, we may sense Christ calling us to serve or give in ways that we had not expect.

We may wake up in the middle of the night feeling the grief and struggle of another Christian in the community. We may be compelled to write letters, to give money, to cook, or to serve in any number of ways. The Risen Christ calls us to face one another in love. We turn toward friends and family with the love of Christ, but we also turn toward enemies in love. Unthinkable.

If we follow the pattern of Christ in the Gospels or even the Apostles in Acts, we may begin to walk toward those difficult people and those difficult places. Peter follows the Spirit of God to the house of a Gentile Cornelius. He confesses that it is the Lord who has prepared Him for this meeting. Some missionaries begin work in a new village by listening to the stories of the leader or the chief. They turn and face the leader in respect, trusting that Christ is leading them together.

Before telling the story of the Gospel, they simply listen to the story of the people. As Don Richardson met with a tribal people who considered betrayal as a virtue, he listened and waited and faced them. As he learned them and learned to love them in Christ, he came to realize that even their own stories had images that could in fact point to Christ. They exchanged children with rival tribes when negotiating a peace treaty. These children were called “peace children.”

Finally, Richardson tells them the story of Jesus Christ, the Peace child sent from God above. Might we learn to turn and face those people near and far? Richard Wurmbbrand found ways to love the very people who were torturing him for his faith even begging God to redeem them.

As we face people in and through Christ, we cultivate habits of listening, encouraging, thanksgiving, bearing burdens, embracing and even confronting.

As we seek to follow the Risen Lord, we follow Him in this creation, in this time, around these people and in these places. May we learn how to turn and face those around us even as we remember those from ages past, and may we behold the all through generous love of God revealed in Christ.