

## MESSAGE: HOLY DEAD, NOT WHOLLY DEAD

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Today as a church we celebrate All Saints day. We recently had All Hallow's Eve – Halloween – during which people celebrate the spooky dead. Today we remember the sacred dead, the holy dead.

We also remember that holy dead are not wholly dead. There is life yet in them. In fact, in their reach and influence they can be more alive than we are.

This celebration of All Saints day began centuries ago. The medieval church took great pains to remember her saints. Saints were people who were spiritual celebrities – superheroes.

They were the martyrs – those who gave their lives rather than betray their faith. They were the miracle workers. They were prophets, warriors, peacemakers, and church builders.

As these saints were canonized, which essentially means they were officially recognized by the church for their faith and works, each was assigned a day. Every day of the year has a saint associated with it; every day the church remembers and celebrates a hero of the past.

As you may imagine, over the course of centuries the church has recognized many outstanding people and that number continues to grow. The calendar year, however does not. There are only 365 days in most years, and there are many more notable people in God's kingdom than that, so November first was dedicated as the day on which we celebrate all those saints who didn't get their own day.

In the Reformed tradition, of which we are a part, saint days are largely uncelebrated. The Reformers thought this whole business of naming saints was an absolutely dreadful idea and turned away from this tradition along with many other practices of the medieval church.

But now, after 500 years, the pendulum is beginning to swing back the other way. Modern reformed churches are now reclaiming liturgy. Liturgy is basically the pattern and rhythm of the church that gives meaning to the ordinary; the rites and rituals, holy

days – all the things we do down below to evoke and invoke what we perceive from above.

So as we celebrate this day of All Saints we align ourselves with the church as it has existed for millennia, which of course is the very purpose of this day – to reflect on our roots.

However, as we return to the past we don't simply move backwards and do what people used to do. As we recreate and participate in this celebration we bring our modern selves and modern sensibilities to it.

Our definition of saint is much different than that of the church in the middle ages. In the past, to be a saint and have your own named feast day there were some pretty high expectations to be met.

A saint must have led an exemplary life of goodness and virtue worthy of imitation. They should have died a heroic death as a martyr, or have undergone a major conversion of heart where a previously immoral life was abandoned and replaced by one of outstanding holiness and sanctification.

On top of this, there would have to be evidence of two post-mortem miracles – I suppose this proves that the saint has actually made it to heaven and is still busy up there being saintly.

This are all pretty high bars – the marks of a spiritual overachiever. It certainly doesn't sound like something I could aspire to.

The reformed view of a saint is quite a bit different, and a lot closer to what the early church believed a saint was.

St Paul wrote a letter to 'all the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi, along with the bishops and deacons.'

St Peter wrote to the believers in Asia Minor 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.'

In the early church there didn't seem to be a distinction between super-Christians and regular Christians. We are all a holy nation, a royal priesthood, called out of darkness to testify to the world about God's life-giving light.

In Reformed understanding every one of us are a saint. Every single baptized believer is a saint. This changes everything. It means that we are not only celebrating those superheroes of faith, but we're celebrating all of us, and all who have gone before us.

All those who have walked the Christian walk before us are the Holy dead, but not wholly dead. They live on.

We see that as we look around us. Look at the inscriptions on the windows, the rolls of names on the back wall, in the front of the bible, on the baptismal font. The names of saints surround us.

Every single thing that you see around you was lovingly placed by a saint and is touched by saints week after week. Objects can absorb holiness. Objects can become sacred. Look at all the sacred objects around you and remember the saints who poured their labour and love into making this space what it is today.

As you look at the sacred objects, take note of the people you see. They too are sacred. Every single person in this room is here because a saint heard the Word of God and passed it along. We worship God together this morning because of the saints that preceded us. We are born in flesh, and born in faith by those who came before us.

We are all saints. We are part of a family whose presence echoes throughout centuries, most of them ordinary believers, holding no office, giving no speeches, yet humbly reflecting something of the love of Christ to those they met along the way.

The saint is the grandmother who brings her granddaughter to church to encounter saving grace; the man who sits beside the unemployed youth and listens; the one who brings cookies and a smile to a nursing home resident.

A saint is a person who is an example of faithfulness; a person who, because of their faith in Christ, emits the light of Jesus in their lives.

We may be small candles rather than a bright lamp, but that is still a wonderful miracle! The small light that shines in the darkness is powerful indeed; God is glorified in small candles.

So let's take some time to remember some of the candles of our past. Not necessarily the famous ones, but those lights that have touched our lives.

Who has inspired in you a deeper faith in God?  
Who has made you want to seek out and know the God they believe in?  
Whose love and whose testimony has awakened something in your soul?

These are the everyday Christians who carry the church, and who live as a ray of hope in a discouraged and discouraging world.

Today we remember them, because without them we are nothing.

Especially today we remember those saints that we have lost over the past year, and we give thanks to God for each one of them.

In silence let's remember those precious souls who no longer walk by our side in this life, yet whose integrity and steadfast love profoundly touched and enriched our lives.

Let us give thanks for all the redeemed.

God of life, we give you thanks for all those people, so very dear to us, whose loving presence here on earth is no more, yet who live a larger life hidden in Christ.  
Grant them your peace and joy,  
*and may perpetual light shine upon them*

We give you thanks for those servants of yours whom we never met, yet whose faith and love were like beacons in this world of shadows.  
Grant them your peace and joy,  
*and may perpetual light shine upon them*

Lord our God, neither life nor death can separate us from your love; abide in us as we abide in you, and so keep us always united with our loved ones in this world and the next.

Give us courage, constancy and hope; through him who died and was buried and rose again for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.