

Rt. Rev. Vincent Peitt

Walter Haddon

All Saints Day Sunday

November 5, 2006 – Grace Church, Haddonfield

FROM THE FIRST READING:

“LET US NOW SING THE PRAISES OF FAMOUS MEN, THE HEROES OF OUR NATION’S HISTORY, THROUGH WHOM THE LORD ESTABLISHED HIS RENOWN.” Sirach 44:1-2

ALL SAINTS DAY IS A VERY SPECIAL DAY IN THE CHURCH’S CALENDAR AND IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN IMPORTANT DAY FOR ME PERSONALLY. IT IS ONE OF THE SEVEN MAJOR FEAST DAYS OF THE CHURCH, INCLUDING EASTER DAY, CHRISTMAS, THE EPIPHANY, THE DAY OF PENTECOST, ASCENSION DAY, AND TRINITY SUNDAY.

I WAS ORDAINED PRIEST ON ALL SAINTS DAY AND MY FIRST PARISH WAS ALL SAINTS CHURCH, WENONAH. AND I FIND IT INTERESTING THAT MY LAST DUTY AS A PARISH PRIEST, EVEN THOUGH I WAS A BISHOP WAS DEAN OF THE CATHEDRAL OF ALL SAINTS IN ALBANY. IT IS AN IMPORTANT DAY FOR ME, BUT IT IS JUST AS IMPORTANT FOR ALL OF US. FIVE OF THE OTHER SIX DAYS ARE DIRECTLY CONCERNED WITH THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS; HIS BIRTH, HIS RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION, HIS EPIPHANY TO THE GENTILES THROUGH THE THREE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST AND HIS GIFT TO US OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AT PENTECOST. ALL SAINTS DAY IS A VERY PERSONAL DAY FOR US IT IS CONCERNED WITH THOSE WHO HAVE LIVED PHYSICALLY ON THE EARTH AND WHO ARE NO LONGER WITH US. ON ALL SAINTS DAY, AND TODAY, ON ALL SAINTS DAY SUNDAY, WE HOLD UP IN PRAYER ALL OF THE

SAINTS OF GOD. WE ALSO REMEMBER THOSE OF OUR OWN FAMILY WHO HAVE DIED. WE PRAY FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN CLOSE TO US; FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES AND OTHERS WHO WE SEE NO LONGER AND WHO WE HAVE COMMENDED INTO THE HANDS OF THE LORD. BECAUSE JESUS DIED AND ROSE FOR US, WE ARE ASSURED THAT THEY, AND SOMEDAY, OURSELVES, ARE INDEED IN PARADISE.

THERE ARE FOUR MARVELOUS READINGS ASSIGNED FOR THIS DAY. YOU KNOW THAT THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH FOLLOWS A THREE YEAR CYCLE FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD. ALL SAINTS DAY IS AN EXCEPTION. THE READINGS, YEAR BY YEAR, NEVER CHANGE. THEY BEGIN TODAY WITH A LESSON FROM ECCLESIASTICUS FOLLOWED BY A PSALM OF PRAISE. THE EPISTLE IS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATIONS IN WHICH WE HEAR OF THOSE WHO HAVE GONE THROUGH TERRIBLE PERSECUTIONS AND WHO NOW STAND BEFORE THE THRONE OF GOD. AND THE GOSPEL? IT IS THE BEATTITUDES. THIS IS A TEACHING OF JESUS AND IT LAYS DOWN FOR US A WAY OF LIFE.

TODAY IS ALSO A SPECIAL DAY BECAUSE WE HAVE A CLASS OF CANDIDATES WHO WILL BE PRESENTED TO THE BISHOP FOR THE LAYING ON OF HANDS IN CONFIRMATION (AND RECEPTION).

IF THIS DAY IS SO VERY SPECIAL AND IMPORTANT, WHAT DOES THIS DAY MEAN TO YOU PERSONALLY. WHAT DO THESE READINGS, ASSIGNED FROM THE HOLY SCRIPTURES FOR ALL SAINTS DAY, HAVE TO SAY TO US TODAY.

I HAVE CHOSEN THE OPENING VERSE FROM THE FIRST READING, FROM THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTICUS AND I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I DID IT WITH GREAT RELUCTANCE. WHEN I BEGAN TO THINK ABOUT A SERMON FOR THIS DAY, THE LAST THING I WOULD HAVE CHOSEN WOULD BE THE OPENING VERSE, "LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN." EVERY YEAR, FOR YEARS AND YEARS, ON ALL SAINTS DAY, I LISTEN AS A LECTOR READS THAT READING. I HEAR THOSE OPENING WORDS AND I GET STUCK. INSTEAD OF LISTENING THE REST OF THE READING I START THINKING ABOUT THAT OPENING STATEMENT. I WONDER; AREN'T THERE ANY FAMOUS WOMEN? THEN I WONDER IS THIS ONE OF THOSE PASSAGES THAT COULD BE TRANSLATED AS "PEOPLE" BUT BECAUSE SCHOLARLY MEN ALWAYS DID THE TRANSLATING IN THE PAST, IT WAS TRANSLATED AS "MEN." I HAVE IN MY POSSESSION A LECTIONARY FOR THE THREE CYCLES OF THE EUCHARISTIC READINGS AS USED IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH. THE TRANSLATION USED IS THE REVISED STANDARD VERSION. BUT THE TEXT IS AMENDED AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IS USED WHEN POSSIBLE. SO I LOOKED UP THE PROPERS FOR TODAY IN THIS LECTIONARY AND FOUND THE FIRST READING FROM ECCLESIASTICUS AND THIS IS HOW IT BEGAN:

“LET US NO PRAISE FAMOUS MEN AND OUR FATHERS IN THEIR GENERATIONS.”

THE IMPORTANT THING FOR ME IS THAT I WENT ON AND READ THIS READING FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY, MANY YEARS. THIS BIBLE PASSAGE HAS SOME VERY IMPORTANT THINGS TO SAY WHICH I NEEDED TO HEAR AND UNDERSTAND. BUT, I HAD BEEN STUCK AND I WASN'T LISTENING TO THEM. THIS READING TALKS ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE LIVED AND DIED AND IT TELLS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THEIR LIVES AND WHAT THEY DID AND SHARED AND LEFT FOR THOSE WHO WERE TO FOLLOW THEM. THE THING THAT MOVED ME THE MOST WAS THAT ALONG WITH THE FAMOUS AND THOSE WHO HAD DONE GREAT THINGS AND WERE REMEMBERED FOR THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS, SIRACH OF ECCLESIASTICUS TELLS ABOUT THOSE WHO ARE UNREMEMBERED AND HAVE NO MEMORIAL. THEY ARE DEAD AND IT IS AS THOUGH THEY HAD NEVER EXISTED, AS THOUGH THEY HAD NEVER BEEN BORN OR LEFT CHILDREN TO SUCCEED THEM. SIRACH CONTINUES AND SAYS, OUR FOREBEARS AND THEIR POSTERITY WILL CONTINUE FOREVER AND THEIR GLORY WILL NOT BE BLOTTED OUT. IT IS A WONDERFUL READING AND I HAVE BEEN MISSING IT ALL THESE YEARS.

TWO WEEKS AGO, RIDING IN MY CAR AND THINKING ABOUT ALL SAINTS DAY, THE OPENING WORDS OF THIS READING

SUDDENLY FLOODED INTO MY BEING. I COULDN'T GET RID OF IT. IT KEPT COMING BACK. SINCE I ALWAYS ASK THE LORD TO DIRECT ME AND BE WITH ME IN ALL THINGS, AND THAT INCLUDES WRITING SERMONS, I DECIDED I HAD A DIRECTIVE FROM THE LORD.

THE MEMBERS OF THIS CLASS OF CANDIDATES, I HAVE A QUESTION: LET ME ASK YOU THIS! AS YOU LISTENED THIS MORNING TO THIS LESSON FROM SIRACH (THAT IS ANOTHER NAME FOR THIS BOOK FROM THE APOCRYPHA) DO YOU THINK THAT IT MIGHT HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY TO YOU THIS MORNING WHICH COULD BE IMPORTANT FOR YOUR LIFE?

OR DO YOU THINK THAT IT IS JUST A RELIC FROM THE PAST, A PIECE OF LITERATURE THAT HAS NO RELEVANCE FOR LIFE TODAY?

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT THIS READING TELLS US IS THAT PEOPLE ARE REMEMBERED BECAUSE OF THINGS THAT THEY HAVE DONE. THOSE WHO WORK FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE STAND OUT CLEARLY AND WE CAN NAME THEM. JUST LOOK IN THE FRONT OF THE PRAYER BOOK AND SEE THE NAMES LISTED EACH MONTH THAT WE CELEBRATE AS SAINTS. THERE ARE OTHERS AND SOME OF THEM ARE ANONOMOUS; THERE ARE MANY OTHERS, NOT IN THE LIST OF SAINTS; MOTHER THERESA, ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND PERSON AFTER PERSON, THAT WE EACH COULD NAME. WE DON'T

PARTICULARLY REMEMBER PEOPLE BECAUSE THEY WEILDED POWER. WHAT DID THEY DO WITH THAT POWER IS THE IMPORTANT QUESTION. PEOPLE WHO WERE MORE CONCERNED WITH THEMSELVES THAN WITH OTHERS DO NOT FIND A PLACE ON THE LIST. AS I STUDIED THIS READING FROM THE APOCRAPHA THE MORE I REALIZED, IT IS ABOUT PEOPLE WORKING FOR JUSTICE IN THE WORLD.

I AM CERTAIN THAT YOU ARE EACH AWARE AND KNOW THAT ONE OF THE VOWS THAT YOU WILL BE TAKING TODAY AS YOU RENEW YOUR BAPTISMAL COVENANT WITH GOD IS CONCERNED WITH JUSTICE. THE QUESTION IS: "WILL YOU STRIVE FOR JUSTICE AMONG ALL PEOPLE AND RESPECT THE DIGNIGTY OF EVERY HUMAN BEING?" SOUNDS SIMPLE ENOUGH, BUT IS IT? WHAT IT MEANS IS STANDING UP FOR SOMEONE WHEN THEY ARE BEING PERSECUTED OR JUST "PUT-DOWN." IT IS NOT ALWAYS A POPULAR THING TO DO AND MAY IN FACT BE COSTLY TO YOU.

I WANT TO RELATE TO YOU THIS MORNING A TRUE STORY WHICH TOOK PLACE, MANY YEARS AGO NOW, IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA BEFORE APARTIED WAS DISMANTLED. APARATIED WAS THE SOCIAL POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA WHICH SAID THAT THE MAJORITY OF THE PEOPLE, THE BLACK PEOPLE, HAD NO RIGHTS.

THE BLACK PASTOR OF ZION ANGLICAN CHURCH APPROACHED JUDGE OLIVER ONE DAY TO ASK HIM IF HE WOULD PARTICIPATE IN THE MAUNDY THURSDAY SERVICE OF THE WASHING OF THE FEET AT ZION CHURCH. JUDGE OLIVER WAS KNOWN FOR HIS FAIRNESS AND FOR HIS WORK FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE IN SOUTH AFRICA. JUDGE OLIVER AGREED TO COME. AT THE TIME IN THE LITURGY FOR THE WASHING OF FEET, JUDGE OLIVER CAME UP AND WASHED THE FEET OF MARTHA FORTUIN, BLACK WOMAN. MARTHA HAD WORKED FOR THE JUDGE WHEN HIS CHILDREN WERE YOUNG AND REMEMBERING HOW MARTHA FORTUIN WOULD KISS THE FEET OF HIS CHILDREN AFTER SHE HAD WASHED THEM EACH NIGHT, THE JUDGE LEANED OVER AND KISSED MARTHA'S FEET.

THE MEDIA DISCOVERED WHAT HAD HAPPENED AND IT WAS FRONT PAGE NEWS. THE CONSEQUENT OF WHAT HE HAD DONE WAS THAT THE CHIEF JUDGESHIP, WHICH WAS TO BE HIS, WAS DENIED JUDGE OLIVER.

THE NEXT DAY, THE PASTOR OF ZION CHURCH CAME TO SEE JUDGE OLIVER AND APOLOGIZED FOR PUTTING HIS CAREER IN JEOPORDY. JUDGE OLIVER REPLIED TO HIM AND SAID, "DON'T THINK ANYTHING ABOUT IT. "BEING AT YOUR CHURCH ON MAUNDY THURSDAY AND TAKING PART IN THE WASHING OF FEET WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANY CHIEF JUDGESHIP."

IS IT ANY WONDER THAT THE PEOPLE OF ZION CHURCH CHANGED THE NAME TO THE CHURCH OF THE WASHING OF FEET?

THERE WAS A PRICE THAT JUDGE OLIVER PAID FOR RESPECTING THE DIGNITY OF EVERY HUMAN BEING AND FOR STRIVING FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE. IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY.

PERSONALLY, I LEARNED SOMETHING AS I READ SCRIPTURE AND PREPARED THIS SERMON. I LEARNED TO BE OPEN TO WHAT GOD IS SAYING TO ME AND NOT GET STUCK IN ONE PLACE. I LEARNED TO BE READY TO LISTEN AND TO LEARN.

BUT MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT, THE LORD IS ASKING US, ASKING YOU, IN YOUR LIFE, TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED AND TO BE THERE FOR OTHERS WHEN THERE IS A NEED TO BE FULFILLED.

THE QUESTION ABOUT JUSTICE IS NOT JUST FOR THE CONFIRMATION CLASS, IT IS FOR ALL OF US. WE ALL RENEW OUR BAPTISMAL COVENANT TODAY. THE LORD ASKS US TODAY IF WE WILL WORK FOR JUSTICE AMONG ALL PEOPLE; WILL YOU RESPECT THE DIGNITY OF EVERY HUMAN BEING? I PRAY THAT NONE OF YOU WILL EVER BE PLACED IN A HARD AND DIFFICULT SITUATION SUCH AS JUDGE OLIVER. HOWEVER, AS A CHRISTIAN AND FOLLOWER OF JESUS, YOU

WILL TAKE A SOLEMN VOW THAT THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT YOU WOULD DO IN SUCH A SITUATION.

THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN AND TO BE A MEMBER OF THE BODY OF CHRIST. IT IS WHAT IS MEANT BY JESUS' COMMAND TO PICK UP OUR CROSS AND FOLLOW HIM.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN SUCH A SITUATION? WHAT WOULD ANY OF US DO?

I CAN ONLY ANSWER FOR MYSELF. I KNOW THAT I AM STRENGTHENED AND SUPPORTED BY THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AS I TRY TO DO THE RIGHT THING. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, I GIVE THANKS TO GOD, A LOVING AND FORGIVING GOD WHO, WHEN I FAIL AND WHEN I ASK FORGIVENESS, SETS ME BACK ON MY FEET TO BEGIN AGAIN.

ALL SAINTS DAY IS A WONDERFUL DAY FOR YOU TO BE CONFIRMED AND IT IS A GREAT DAY FOR US ALL TO RENEW OUR COVENANT WITH GOD. LET US THEN DEAR FRIENDS, PRAISE FAMOUS PEOPLE, MEN AND WOMEN, WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US WHO HAVE LEFT US A HERITAGE AND SERVED AS MODELS FOR US. WE REMEMBER THEM TODAY. AND WE PRAY THAT WE CAN FOLLOW IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS, EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

AMEN