

Sermon for All Saints and Souls, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34. Revelation 7:2-4 and 9-end. Psalm 145:3-13.
Matthew 5:1-12.

The Collect: Almighty God, who has knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord: grant us grace so to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou has prepared for those who unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord, the Maker and Redeemer of all believers: grant to the faithful departed all the unsearchable benefits of thy Son's Passion; that in the day of his appearing they may be manifested as thy children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Revelation 7:13 'And one of the elders addressed me and asked: "Who are these dressed in white robes, and where have they come from?"'

Zuzu Bailey, a little daughter of George Bailey in the film 'It's a wonderful life.': "Teacher says, 'Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.'" This line has become a perennial favourite, taken as it is from a very heart-warming Christmas movie. Jimmy Stewart played her father, a man who was being shown by an angel, Clarence, how his life had a powerful positive effect on the people around him. The part of Zuzu was played by Karen Grimes. She was six at the time and is now eighty one. Jimmy Stewart got his secretary to track her down nearly forty years after the film. Her life had turned out to be far from saccharine. Her mother got early onset Alzheimers when Karen was only eight, and died when she was fourteen. The following year her father got killed in a car accident, then she was compulsorily fostered with a mean, unstable aunty. Her first husband divorced her, her second husband died of cancer. Their youngest son took his own life. Despite having sixteen films to her credit as a child star, she never made it as an adult actor, and lost the fortune she had already earned. She became a medical technologist. But, in the film the sound of the bell ringing on a Christmas tree provokes this memorable line, and Jimmy Stewart/George Bailey knows that the second-class angel, Clarence, who has been waiting three hundred years to get his 'wings', has at last got them.

It's good to have a film that reminds people of their worth, despite the hardships they might have to suffer in life. It's important that we all have a sense of appreciation for the vast majority of people who have led thankless lives, and without them the world would have been even more dysfunctional than it appears to be. But, does innate goodness get the departed their wings? Is everyone a Saint? Do all angels and saints get wings? Of course, ordinary angels don't have wings, cherubim and seraphim do. Some claim to have seen them, and report varying answers!! Does everyone get into heaven? We don't become angels when we die. Very few of the billions who have died are formally acknowledged by the Church to be Saints. The best explanation of what the word saint means was written for kids: 'In Christianity, the word "**saint**" refers to any person who is "in Christ", and in whom Christ dwells, whether in Heaven or in earth.' There is a pithy definition of who might qualify, namely someone who has striven heroically for holiness.

The title Saint is bestowed by the Church only in a canonical sense. However, all who have been conceived on earth have been embodied in earthly terms as a soul. This soul, in a way, is an heavenly being having an earthly experience. It returns to its Maker after bodily death. Jim Packer, a protestant theologian, said that the soul is ‘your conscious personal self.’

Listen to Acts 3:23 (the JB Phillips translation):

“Now of course I know, my brothers, that you had no idea what you were doing any more than your leaders had. But God had foretold through all his prophets that his Christ must suffer and this was how his words came true. Now you must repent and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, that time after time your souls may know the refreshment that comes from the presence of God. Then he will send you Jesus, your long-heralded Christ, although for the time he must remain in Heaven until that universal restoration of which God spoke in ancient times through all his holy prophets. For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever he says to you. And it shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’

But, does the soul live for ever? Ezekiel 18:4 reads: ‘Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.’ Matthew 10:28 reads: ‘And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.’ There are many Bible verses that mention the soul and the body, and often associated with the spirit too. Some imply that a body is animated by the soul, some by the spirit. But, it is crystal clear that there is a state of death of the body; which was made from the dust of the earth, and returns to it. Yet, also, after death God gives the soul a new heavenly body. 1 Corinthians 15:35-48 examines this issue. v40 ‘There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one kind and the splendour of earthly bodies is another. 45 Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. 47 The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. 48 As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.’

So, brothers and sisters, it would be right, and biblical, to encourage you to strive for heroic holiness, that you might fulfil good works of penitence and faith in preparation for your soul to survive into eternity. You can be a Saint in training. You might not star in an Hollywood movie, nor earn your wings to the accompaniment of a bell. You won’t become an angel. But, your soul is a gift of God with the capacity to outlive a body made of dust. It doesn’t need wings in heaven. A new and more glorious heavenly body will be given to those who survive the second judgment and enter into the joy of eternal life.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.