The CATHEDRAL of ST. PHILIP
SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

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Private, Not Solitary

A Meditation for 5:22 p.m. Contemplative Eucharist by the The Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Feast of All Saints

The practice of contemplative prayer, the practice of the presence of God, is normally a private pursuit. In stillness and silence, we let the Spirit direct our awareness to the sacred: a sacred word, a sacred reading, a sacred image. We might turn inwards to the interior castle of the soul, moving from mansion to mansion, room to room, seeking Christ who lives at the center. We may even experience the divine presence in the ordinary and everyday, as Brother Lawrence did, praying amidst the clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen.

The contemplative life is a private life. Try as we might to verbalize and externalize our experience of God's presence, our various attempts fall short. We offer each other glimpses, imperfect insights, similes and metaphors for our intimacy with Christ. Our poetic devices ultimately remind us just how private this life of prayer truly is, a life most deeply shared between the soul and God.

And yet, private is not the same as solitary.

When we contemplate the presence of God, the Spirit guides our souls into the company of Christ. In silence, we meet the one who dwells at the center of all things, and there we find that he is not alone. Standing before the Lamb, our prayers join us with the multitude beyond count and comprehension described by John in his Revelation, the heavenly mass of martyrs and mystics, all the saints Christ has summoned to His feast.

Who are these saints? These are those whom the Beatitudes call blessed, people through whom the tenderness of Christ becomes visible. The saints are those who point us towards the heart of Jesus, who teach us how to embody in our own lives the beatific virtues. The saints teach us how to pray, both in this life and in the life to come.

There is great consolation in this. Many of us have prayed beside someone we can no longer see: a parent, a grandparent, a spouse, a friend – someone whose voice still echoes in the words of the Lord's Prayer. In the silence of prayer, they are not lost to us but alive in the presence of Christ. The prayers of the saints are never ceasing; not even death can still their lips. And so, when we find our lips still in a season of spiritual dryness, the saints meet us like an oasis in the desert, our spiritual hunger met, our thirst for God quenched. The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words, and the saints, our own beloved dead among them, pray for us, day and night, whether or not we can join with them.

We pray in private, and we never pray alone.

With the saints, we stand before the Lamb, the Lamb who is also a shepherd. In prayer, we are sheltered with God's own presence, led by the Spirit to the water of life. The saints who prayed through their own deserts stand at the water now, and they pray for us to come to it.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and from ours: the tears we shed for those we can no longer see, and the tears we shed in the silence when no prayer will come. Until that last day, in stillness and in silence, we pray in the company of Christ and all his saints.

Let us pray.

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