

Saints Alive!

Saints alive! Is an early to mid-20th century expression of surprise, delight, or amazement. I usually heard it prefaced by “my” as in “My saints alive! Didn’t it snow!” “...wasn’t that good!” “...where did you go?” You only have to read Heb. 11 and 12 to know that the Lord wants saints to be alive to us. Heb. 11 goes through some famous and infamous saints of the OT Church naming some and not others. Then, chapter 12, points you to them all saying: “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

That the saints are alive is a fact in Christ. A saint is a forgiven sinner. One whom the Spirit has brought to faith in Jesus, God the Son, having actively kept God’s Law in his place and Him having passively suffered all the Law’s punishments thereby satisfying, appeasing God’s wrath against sinners. It’s true; usually the title ‘saint’ is reserved for those passed on in Christ. However, Death is not the division between saint and no saint. Jesus is. All those in Jesus regardless on what side of the river of Death are saints. Death to us is a broad, deep, cold river like the Mississippi at New Orleans – a mile wide. But to Jesus Death is the Mississippi at Itasca State Park in Minnesota. So narrow a child can step across it.

The saints in heaven, so near in Jesus at Communion, that they laud and magnify God’s glorious name with us, are also praying. We say in our Lutheran Confessions that the saints in heaven “pray fervently for the church” in general (AP, XXI, 9-10) and even perhaps for the individual (SC, II, III, 26). While we deny that saints are to be invoked, prayed to, or honored the way God is, they aren’t for us, as they are for many Protestants, cut off from the Church on earth. Our prayers and praising joins with theirs.

Saints being alive can be a problem. Read our Lutheran Confessions. We detail how when the saints were first mentioned in the prayers of the ancient church, it was not done in bad way, but then came invocation of certain saints for certain problems. The next step was saying the images of saints contained magical power (AC, XXI, 34). Look at a Roman Catholic Church calendar. They have at least one saint for every day. And they have one for every problem, sickness, and vocation. The Reformation removed from our calendar all but saints mentioned in the Bible. The liberal Lutherans in their 1982 *Lutheran Book of Worship* added among others Martin Luther and the 60s Pope, John XXIII. The LCMS balked at this but added in their 1982 *Lutheran Worship* Luther, Walther, and the Presentation of Augsburg Confession. The 2006 *Lutheran Service Book* made these commemorations but then added 60+ people, both Bible names and names you probably haven’t heard of.

It’s a very significant thing to enshrine a major change in practice in a hymnal that could be around for 25 plus years. On the page where they start the list of people to be commemorated, *LSB* quotes AC 21, “Our churches teach that the remembrance of the saints is to be commended in order that we may imitate their faith and good works according to our calling.” Read AC 21,1 yourself. The German says the first reason that saints are to be remembered is “that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received”. Read the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 21, 3. It says the first of the 3-fold honor in regard to a saint is thanking God for showing His mercy in them. The imitation of works is last. But to do that you have to know what works they actually did. Look up St. Lucia. She certainly died for the faith, but legend takes over.

A pastor I knew in Detroit, put out his newsletter calendar with the title: The Church in Your Home. He had a saint on every day. Long ago I gave a set of these to someone who said they would put them in an electronic format. In a way, I’m glad that never happened. There is a reason why the first Lutherans broke so decisively with what the church of their day was doing with the saints. It’s for the same reason, I always warn about using study Bibles. You can end up reading men’s notes more than God’s Word. So with the saints. What little we really know about saints beyond the Bible can push out what we actually do know. Also, read *Apology* 27, 38. See how we make use of the history of St. Anthony? We don’t refer to his piety, but show how Anthony came to understand “that justification was not to be attributed to the way of life he had undertaken.”

Now we can turn to the saint’s day we celebrate today: Joseph of Arimathea. It’s very fitting that we should remember him. If we had patron saints, Joseph would be the patron saint of saints alive in a Cancel Culture. A Cancel Culture is where conventional wisdom, what everybody thinks, or more likely what social media dictates, is the only acceptable way of thinking. Thinking differently is not tolerated and even persecuted. Cancel Culture is particularly hard on Bible-Believing, conscious bound Christians. Historic Christian beliefs based on God’s Word are rejected. No surprise there; that is what those outside the Church have always done. What has changed is our right – particularly in America – to publicly confess these teachings is now denied. The Biblical view of sexuality, the unborn, marriage, and even history is attacked, belittled, in effect canceled.

Joseph of Arimathea can help. There are fantastic stories about him from 4th to 13th centuries. He’s the guardian of the Holy Grail, and with apologies to St. Patrick, Joseph is the bringer of the Gospel and driver of the snakes out of Ireland. He is a friend not only to Jesus but to Pilate. You should pay attention when a Catholic scholar concludes as he does in Joe’s case: “These stories obtained wide credence, but they are devoid of any historical foundation” (Attwater, D., *Saints*, 204). Worldhistory.org is the only place I found that Chrysostom, 5th century, said Joe was one of the first 72 pastors sent by Jesus in Luke 10. Such stories are entertaining but not helpful, and since they are just stories, they aren’t edifying either.

However, what the Bible says of him is both helpful and edifying. Matthew says he was a rich man and a disciple of Jesus. Mark says he was respected member of the powerful Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Luke says he was a member but didn't consent to their purpose and deed of rejecting and crucifying Jesus. And Luke also tells us he was good in the eyes of men and righteous, i.e. a believer, before God and expecting the Kingdom of Heaven in Jesus. John too says that Joe was a disciple of Jesus "but secretly for fear of the Jews." Before, we dismiss him out of hand for this cowardice consider what John 12:42 says: "Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in Jesus. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue." There was a real fear of being canceled by the rulers of the local Old Testament church. And Joseph wasn't alone in this fear. "Many" among the leaders were with him.

Luther had a high view of Joseph. In *Bondage of the Will* which our Confessions also regard as a confessional document for us. "What happened under Christ Himself, when all the Apostles were offended at Him, when He was denied and condemned by all the people, and there were only a Joseph, a Nicodemus, and a thief upon the cross preserved?" (97). He confessed Jesus when most all fell away. He "took courage" "was emboldened"; I'd translate "dared" to go into Pilate and request the body of Jesus. Then he provides his own tomb fulfilling that Jesus would be buried with the rich. And Mt, Mk. And Lk all say he, singularly, laid him in a tomb. John alone has 'they'. Burying the dead is still considered a gruesome task. But read what Is. 52:14 says about how Jesus looked: "His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness." Picture that before you call Joe a coward.

Go back to the trial. Luke says: Joe didn't consent with the Sanhedrin's decision or action. Read again those trials. Read the anger, the absolute rage that exploded into a blind, striking, slapping, slugging, and spitting by the Sanhedrin. In the face of that, Joe wasn't consenting. Kids in Confirmation get quiet at places where their sins become real and they realize there is no hope in them to stop sinning. In Junior High, every kid knows someone who is picked on by everyone. When that happens, the 8th Commandment calls the Christian to speak up. Every kid knows you do that and the ridicule, name-calling, teasing, and maybe even pushing around that is falling on that kid is going to start on you. Well, Joseph faced a mob of men that had lost their minds in demonic hatred, blasphemy, and violence. His very life could've been canceled but he spoke up.

And look at the last things we know about him. He comes around at Jesus' death. The Bride in Song of Solomon says that her "love is as strong as death. Its passion is as relentless as the grave. Its flames are flames of fire, a mighty blaze" (8:6). And note after Joseph buries Jesus, He doesn't come looking for a dead Jesus. He who confessed Jesus in death in the face of a culture that could kill, could along with Nicodemus and the Thief, be the only ones still looking for Paradise in Jesus even before Easter. Our belief that our sins didn't finish Jesus but He finished off our sins; our belief that Satan didn't triumph over Jesus but Jesus over him; our belief that Death didn't swallow Jesus but Jesus Death, could've been the faith of those 3. Such faith is Spirit taught, wrought, and confessed, we don't make it happen. By Word and Sacrament, by Jesus' grace in Word and Deed the Spirit brings this out of us so why not them?

I think my point is supported by the fact that after Good Friday there's no trace of Joe. After confessing that the Kingdom came in Jesus, that He should be buried properly even though He died with criminals, and that He is to be confessed even in death, Joseph goes. Jesus stays. Saints properly highlight Jesus. Read the verse after Heb. 12:1 points us to a great cloud of witnesses around us: Verse 2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." Amen

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St. Joseph of Arimathea (20220731); Luke 23:50-56