

All Saints' Day, 2009 Remembering the Dead

Isaiah 25.6-9; Rev. 21.1-6a; John 11.32-44

At the beginning of each November the church commemorates its saints and its souls on two successive days. The saints are all those, known and unknown, who are redeemed and now in heaven. The souls are the faithful departed whom we believe and hope are on their way to being saints and to dwell in that great community. It's a time when we remember and celebrate these people, and when we think about our vocation to be like them. We pray for the grace of God to help us in our journey towards perfection and towards the sacrifice of being so daring that we can commit ourselves to other people. A new heaven and a new earth indeed.

Today's Gospel reading about the raising of Lazarus – whatever that may mean – shows us Martha and Mary finally convinced of what they have seen, both outwardly and inwardly.

Picture the scene – a beloved brother has died and two sisters are beside themselves with grief. If only Jesus had been here, exclaims Mary, then Lazarus wouldn't have died. For how could there be death where Jesus is present? But news was slower to travel in those times, and when Jesus arrives at the house, Lazarus is well and truly dead and buried, and has been for four days, more than time enough for Jewish religion to consider that the soul has left the body.

Jesus approaches Lazarus's tomb, one very much like the one he will soon be laid in – a rock cave with a huge stone to block the doorway. He makes a very visible and public display of looking up to heaven and praying so that he is seen to be at one with God and to have been sent by him. If there is to be restoration of life, it can come only by divine initiative. But Martha is so distraught that she clearly cannot see any hope of her brother being resurrected. Jesus now does something that nobody present can even imagine asking for – bringing a dead man back to life. "The one who finds me finds life". And he warns everyone as well – "Did I not tell you that if you have faith you will see the glory of God?"

We ordinary mortals who are so often unsure about our prayers and whether they will actually be answered – sometimes that is us standing there by Lazarus's tomb.

And then the momentous words of verse 43 “Lazarus, come out!” John uses the same word here that he uses when the crowd was shouting for Jesus to be crucified after his trial. An extraordinary reversal from death to life. A miracle is about to happen, and for once, one that involves no physical touching. Jesus has arrived, knowing that Lazarus is already dead. There can be no revival from suspended animation, but only to a real life from a real death.

From the beginning of time until this moment the only view of death that has been possible for mankind is that seen from mankind’s perspective. Now a heartstopping change is about to take place. Everyone standing round about the tomb will see what is going to happen, but what will it mean to each person? Seeing is believing, but faith needs both the eye and the heart – the eye to see with and also the mind. Those with faith will see the miracle as the manifestation of the glory of God. The action can only be brought about by the son and the father together.

Lazarus emerges from the tomb, heavily bandaged, with not even his face showing. A **dead** man has heard the voice of God. He has been told to listen, and to live. What is this miracle?

We might think of the blind man whose sight was restored by Jesus. What did he actually see? Quite possibly nothing at all, except what his faith brought him – a glimpse of God, and that Jesus was his Son. Lazarus is now “brought to life”. Are the bandages about to be stripped off and Lazarus then walk off the stage? Probably not. What we see is a man, whether dead **or** alive, who hears the voice of God, and bursts into some kind of sentience and acknowledgment – yes, some kind of life – maybe the one and only true life, that is, not an earthly one.

St John would shoot himself in the foot if the best he could do in this extraordinary piece of writing which we call his gospel was to offer us a materialist account of the story of Lazarus. Many have noted the miracle within a miracle – if he was so tightly bound from head to foot, how could he actually walk out of the tomb at all? He obeyed Christ’s order as a **dead** man – and now he lives, but not on this earth. The restoration of Lazarus to life is but a consequence of the real miracle – the life given by Christ to those who believe in him. St John asks us to consider whether the miracle is the actual wondrous occasion – or the gift of eternal life in realising that the messenger is a divine one who lets one thing happen by doing another.

All of us have been where Martha was in that story. She was torn with grief and sadness, and desperate to be comforted. Her heart was overburdened with a mass of confused feelings. She was crushed by the anticipation of the loneliness and emptiness of the coming months and years. Not she nor anybody else could have expected or even hoped for what would happen to her dead brother. But God gave her an inward peace – something strong enough to make her believe in what happens now, rather than what might happen in the future.

It was Jesus who stood by her and wept at the tomb, just as she was doing, and just as we do when we are broken by despair or hopelessness or grief at the loss of someone we love. And just as I did in the spring when my mother died. At the time, we weep and expect nothing but heartache for today and tomorrow – the worst pain known to medical science.

Jesus was not weeping for Lazarus – he knew what he was going to do for him. He was weeping for Martha because he was sharing her heartache and showing his sympathy for her in her agony. As St Paul says in Romans “Weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice.” Jesus dared to weep and to surrender himself. The sense of surrendering ourselves to experience mutual belonging is at the heart of all marriages and close relationships, just as much as it is the foundation of Christian life and the nature of true friendship. It makes us vulnerable to grief, and is symptomatic of the way as human beings we express what we would call communion. Elsewhere in his gospel St John speaks of this as “abiding love” in order to convey its eternal dimension.

How many funerals have you been to where death had no dominion because you know that the person you were there to mourn and to grieve, the one you have loved and see no longer, is now living more fully and more gloriously than ever before? In the presence of God and in the company of heaven which that great mediaeval mystic Julian of Norwich assures us is “right merry”.

Almost everywhere we look today we are told that a belief in heaven is fast becoming history, and that many of our leading churchmen pursuing their careers of gilded doubt have jettisoned it and that it should no longer be an article of faith. Can heaven really no longer be an article of faith? But then, what on earth would be the point of anything? What would be the point of cathedrals and churches and clergy and services and prayers and discipleship if when you die, that is it? What are we doing here this morning? End of story and full-stop.

We are here not to think that the coffin or the casket contains the real person or the real personality, the person made in the image of God with whom we have talked and argued and laughed and loved and cried. You can't put a whole human life of love and laughter and tears into a box and say that's it – no matter how wonderful the funeral and the music and everything else is. We are here to believe that when the last post is sounded and dies away on earth, the trumpets in heaven will take up the strain and blast out the reveille.

John Bunyan got it right when he wrote: "I am going to my Father's and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river side into which as he went down he said "Death, where is thy sting?" And as he went down deeper he said "Grave where is thy victory? So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

In the acted-out parable of Lazarus, Jesus says to Martha "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live". These are the words spoken at every funeral service, and yet too often they are intoned so sorrowfully and so mournfully that they are robbed of their tremendous meaning. But for those of us who know that Jesus has defeated death, and who know that death is behind us and only love is ahead, they are the most triumphant expression of our faith, and bring home to us a constant sense of the eternal. Which means that you and I together can say with absolute assurance and total certainty: "Upon a life I did not live, and upon a death I did not die. Another's life, another's death, I stake my whole eternity."

When St Paul wrote to the church at Rome he gave us all we need to know: "For those whom God knew before ever they were, he also ordained to share the likeness of his Son, so that he might be the eldest among a large family of brothers; and those whom he called he justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. With all this in mind, what are we to say. If God is on our side, who is against us? Then what can separate us from the love of God? For I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of the spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths – nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so this morning we think and dwell on all those we have laughed and cried and talked and argued and loved with, and who are no longer with us. And we **are** certain that they are now in the company of God – in that dimension we have no words to describe and no minds to imagine. And tomorrow on All Souls' Day we may well cry, as Jesus did, supporting each other as we mourn, and surrendering ourselves to St John's abiding love.

