

## ALL SAINTS

*“The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and no torment will ever touch them. They are at peace.....”* The Wisdom of Solomon 3

On 184 occasions since I came here in 1998 I have been involved in sitting down with families and dealing with the reality that a loved one has passed away. In one sense there is nothing remarkable about that! It is the daily life of any pastor – it is what we do. But in another sense, every single pastoral encounter such as that is unique and in essence moving. And that is partly because each death represents a deeply felt change in the circumstances of all those around. The event can be expected or sudden. Can be exceptionally tragic, or just the natural next process in the journey of life. But it is always significant. And for those who are most closely affected it is a milestone, a marking point, that stays with them forever.

Thus it was for Mary and Martha of Bethany when their brother fell ill and then died. Leave aside the probable cultural scenario that women left on their own in Jewish society would find their perceived value, their place among community, to be suddenly diminished. That was no doubt true. But there was above all that experience of losing touch with a beloved brother. Life would never be the same again.

And yet, in the gospel narrative, this event in Bethany becomes a most significant moment.

It is a time when Jesus reveals more of his nature and his purpose by defying the tomb. Four days after he is laid there, Jesus says “Come forth, Lazarus”. And Lazarus reappears.

It is a story fraught with challenge for us. And I would risk saying to you that I don’t think the story of the raising of Lazarus has any pastoral significance at all for us in our regular experience of coming into contact with death. We don’t expect – nor probably would we welcome – a physical resurrection in our midst. The dead have gone from us in that sense. Sometimes after long suffering, sometimes from greatly advanced age. Usually, although we may miss them sore, we wouldn’t wish them back. There is a difference between “missing”, and knowing that the nature of life is thus. In the Anglican Funeral Service there are a set of seven introductory sentences – often called the “Burial Sentences” – and often used as the coffin is carried into church. They have been set beautifully to music by composers like Croft and Gibbons. The fifth sentence says – “In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?”

“In the midst of life we are in death” – who could argue – that is so true, such an exact description of the way we are made. It might leave you in despair.

But today is All Saints Day. The origin of the festival of All Saints as celebrated in the West dates to May 13, 609 or 610, when Pope Boniface IV consecrated the Pantheon at Rome to the Blessed Virgin and all the martyrs; the feast of the *dedicatio Sanctae Mariae ad Martyres* has been celebrated at Rome ever since. The chosen day, May 13, was a pagan observation of great antiquity, the culmination of three days of the feast of the Lemures, in which the malevolent and restless spirits of the dead were propitiated. Liturgiologists of the Middle

Ages based the idea that this *Lemuria* festival was the origin of that of All Saints on their identical dates and on the similar theme of "all the dead".<sup>1</sup>

The message of All Saints is immensely powerful. It is full of joy and grace and hope. We need to begin by asking "Who are the saints"? Columba, Ninian, Mungo, Andrew ..... The great, the celebrated, the well known – but more movingly perhaps the saints include a great cloud of witnesses who are the unknown too. Unknown except to God and to us.

These are the saints with whom we have shared the journey towards Christ. They are those who have moulded our faith, encouraged us and held us in their arms and in their prayers. They are the parents, the ministers of our childhood perhaps, Sunday School teachers, the friends, the relatives, the faithful – who have upheld us on the way.

The Wisdom of Solomon has been a book of the church since the earliest times. For some Christians, it is part of the Apocrypha ("hidden books"); for others, it is in the Old Testament. Until this book was written (about 50 BC), the best that could be hoped for when one died was to exist in some indeterminate state. Wisdom tells us that being made in the image of God includes sharing with him in immortality. Only the godly, the ethical, will be granted eternal life; those who choose to deviate from God's ways will be punished and will disappear into nothingness.<sup>2</sup>

So when the writer of Wisdom tells us that the "souls of the righteous are in the hands of God", this is a tremendous leap forward in the nature and understanding of faith.

Today we celebrate this as central to our faith. I've never been to a humanist funeral. No doubt I will one day – but talking to a crematorium organist recently he was telling me that some humanist celebrants would put some ministers to shame by the careful way in which they prepare, and the work that has gone in to making the service personal to the deceased. Like ministers, of course, there are good and bad humanist celebrants.

But I have often heard it said by people of faith who go to a humanist funeral – "the music was lovely, the words were beautiful, but there was no feeling of hope."

What we grasp today is this quite unique sense of hope in Christ. Personally, I find it hard to put words or coherent ideas to what it all means. Often we have been complicit in denying death for what it is. Sometimes we are asked to read poems at funerals that do just that. They talk about "going into the next room." They say that "death is nothing at all."<sup>3</sup>

Not true! To deny death in that way is to deny the strength of resurrection.

Forty years or more ago, the Bishop of Woolwich wrote these words that have always stuck in my mind.

"The Christian symbol of resurrection means that death marks a real break. What lies on the other side of it I literally cannot imagine. And I am not going to be distracted by worrying about it.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All\\_Saints](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Saints)

<sup>2</sup> Revised Common Lectionary Commentary – The Anglican Diocese of Montreal

<sup>3</sup> Canon Henry Scott-Holland, 1847-1918, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral

All I know is that God lies the other side of it – as he lies this side of it. As the hymn puts it ‘He changeth not and thou art dear’.

As a Christian, I know my life to be grounded in a love which will not let me go. It comes to me as something completely unconditional. If it could really be put an end to by a bus on the way home it would not have the quality I know it to have.

From such a love neither cancer nor the H-bomb can separate.”<sup>4</sup>

All Saints Day promises that in ways beyond our comprehension, in ways that we can only use amazing images to express, our own personal saints are with us still. Safe in God’s love where no torment will touch.

Death is swallowed up. I want to quote one of my favourite poems to end. John Donne faced death in faith – and in a sense negated it. He never said it didn’t exist. He never claimed it was nothing at all! But he saw it blown away by the powerful message of resurrection – and the promise of the communion of saints.

DEATH be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,  
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,  
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,  
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.  
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,  
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,  
And better then thy stroake; why swell'st thou then;  
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> But that I can’t believe! John A T Robinson Bishop of Woolwich Collins London 1967

<sup>5</sup> Divine Sonnet X John Donne 1572-1631