

Readings for All Saints Sunday

27th October 2024

First Reading: Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the covering that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Second Reading: Revelation 21:1-6a

I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

Gospel: St John 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

A Reflection for All Saints' Sunday

'To the saints who are ... faithful in Christ Jesus: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

This is part of the opening to the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians; similar greetings are found elsewhere in the New Testament. It is a reminder that, in New Testament terms, we are the saints. 'Saints' was used for all the baptised, those called to participate in God's holiness, all God's people. It's that understanding that comes through in the words of the hymn 'For all the saints' which many of us will sing at our services this weekend.

Today, we keep the Feast of All Saints; it is an occasion to celebrate all the faithful who have gone before us. But, if this is so, why is the Feast of All Saints, which falls on 1st November, followed by the Feast of All Souls on 2nd November, when we commemorate the faithful departed? In a word: history. Although, the early church used the term 'saints' for all the baptised, by the end of the second century it was starting to distinguish between those of heroic virtue, especially the martyrs, and the rest of us. In the middle of the second century, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred, and the practice of commemorating the day of death began. However, as there were more martyrs than days in the year, a common feast for all martyrs was instituted, which was originally in the Easter season. Later, this became All Martyrs and All Saints and, in the 9th century it was moved to 1st November and re-named All Saints. The Feast of All Souls was established for the commemoration of the dead, all those Christians who were neither martyrs or named Saints.

This distinction between All Saints and All Souls, and by the establishment of many individual Saints days, means that we tend to think of Saints with a capital 'S' as the heroes of our faith: including the martyrs, and also those who showed in their lives a closer connection to God through deeper devotion and spirituality than most of us manage, or those who were role models for the best that Christians are capable of. To think of only such people as saints is to lose the connection between our lives and theirs. We are all called through baptism to holiness, to grow in faith, to model our lives on that of Jesus Christ and to endeavour to shape ourselves in Christ's image.

And we are called to be saints to each other. Think of someone who has been saintly to you. Perhaps they shared their faith with you, or helped you when you struggled, or someone whose way of living inspired you. Maybe it was long ago, maybe they are sitting here with you now. Could you be that person to someone else? For most of us, that is probably harder to imagine, but it is what we are called to.

Much of the church worldwide is trying to recover this sense of what it means to be ordinary, 'everyday' saints. I know I have used this quotation before, but it is pertinent here. Pope Francis, in a homily last year, said:

Saints are not unreachable or distant heroes, but people like us, our friends, whose starting point is the same gift we have received: Baptism. Indeed, if we think about it, we have certainly met some of them, everyday saints: some righteous person, someone who lives the Christian life seriously, with simplicity ...

Martha, Mary and Lazarus, of whom we hear in our Gospel today, were ordinary people who were friends of Jesus, those he turned to for rest and companionship; everyday people we now remember as saints. They appear in various places in the Gospels, and we know that it was with them that Jesus chose to stay in the last week of his life

before his crucifixion. We are told that Jesus loved them. Today's passage is only part of the account of the raising of Lazarus, and it is, in many ways, a puzzling story.

Lazarus was taken ill, so his sisters sent a message to Jesus. After all, Jesus had healed many people, so surely he would heal his friend. But Jesus deliberately delayed going, and Lazarus died. By the time he arrived at Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. The time is significant: in those days, it was believed that the soul lingered for three days after death before departing, so four days meant there was no doubt he really was dead.

Martha greeted Jesus first, coming out to meet him, saying somewhat reproachfully, as does Mary a little later, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' We hear the same note of reproach in the comment from some of others present in today's Gospel passage: 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' I find these responses comforting, for don't we often think the same way when it is our loved ones who are ill or dying. We don't understand why, sometimes, they are not restored to us. Yet, like Martha, Mary and others, we are called to trust Jesus.

Just before today's passage, Jesus says to Martha: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live...' Having wept with Mary, Jesus then went to the tomb, ordered it be opened, against Martha's very human instincts, and commanded Lazarus to come out and to be unbound.

The raising of Lazarus is a 'sign', one of seven in John's Gospel. Lazarus' own name is symbolic, it means 'God is my help'. His resurrection not only prefigures Jesus' own death and resurrection, it not only demonstrates Jesus' power over physical death, it symbolises the new life to which we have been called in Christ. Jesus calls us to 'come out', to be unbound and set free to serve him and to be his witnesses in the world.

Later, when you look in the mirror, remember that you are a saint who is a beloved child of God. As you look at each other, remember that you are looking at saints who are beloved children of God. As you look out into the world, remember that you are looking at saints and a creation who are beloved of God. We are a communion of saints, on a journey together, called to grow in faith, to shape ourselves in the image of Christ, and to be the body of Christ serving the world.

In the Lord's prayer when we pray 'your kingdom come', we should recognise we all have a part to play in bringing in God's kingdom on earth as ordinary, everyday saints. The final vision of the book of Revelation, that we have today, is a vision of what that kingdom will be like. Not some heavenly paradise detached from this world, but heaven come down to earth to complete God's creation. Then, finally, when the new heaven and the new earth are united, there will be peace, 'death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more'.

To you, the saints who are ... faithful in Christ Jesus: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.