

SUNDAY 30th OCTOBER 2021 ALL SAINTS SUNDAY SUNG MASS ST PETER AND ST PAUL WANTAGE

ISAIAH 25: 6-9

REVELATION 21: 1-6a

JOHN 11: 32-44

Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday and our readings suggest two questions to me. One is ‘What is heaven like?’ and the other is ‘Who can be a Saint?’ And there is possibly another question ‘What on earth has the death of Lazarus got to do with All Saints Sunday?’

Let me try and answer these questions. First of all, I am sure that we all have some idea in our mind of what heaven is like. There are several descriptions in the Bible – one that has God as an old man with white hair and beard and another that describes it as being a place that is sparkling with jewels of all sorts. But our reading from Revelation puts a rather different perspective upon it. Here John writes about a new heaven and seeing that New Jerusalem coming out of heaven. And the quotation makes it quite clear that heaven is on earth. That God’s home is among mortals, that he dwells with us and us with him.

And then there is the question of who can be a saint. If I was to ask you all to name some saints you would probably come up with a reasonable number of names – either ones that we know from the bible or ones we know about because the Pope has beatified them. One of the joys of ministry for me has always been school assemblies and whenever there was a saint’s day you could guarantee that it appeared on the rota beside my name. On All Saints I would ask the children to tell me the names of Saints and they were usually pretty

good on the well know ones, but also, if I was in the right school, come up with St Swithin and St Gregory as the churches they went to were named for these two. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* lists well over a thousand saints and indicates that for every day of the year we should be celebrating at least one saint and often two or three. But I would argue that there are even more saints – those whom we have know, people who we have felt had something special about them; people who just had something about the way they lived their lives that touched others in an amazing way. And those people were saintly because their lives had been transformed, not by their own efforts, but by the grace and mercy of God. The New Testament knew nothing of all these saints that are in the Dictionary, and yet Paul writes to the ‘saints’ who are in Corinth, in Rome, in Phillipi and so on. In fact the New Testament uses the word saint where we would probably use the word Christian. So we could argue that the saints are all here with us in church this morning; that each one of us, by virtue of our baptism and our Christian calling are saints.

And perhaps that is where our reading about the raising of Lazarus comes in today. When things go bad in our life we very often turn immediately to God. Just like this reading where Martha and Mary run to Jesus and say ‘If only you had been here this would never have happened’. In the same way, we often say something similar when life is tough – if you had been with me God..... How strange it is that we tend to think of God not present in our lives when things are moving along normally. It takes the shock of things going wrong to jolt us out of our rut. I am sure we all have those days when all we want to do is go back to bed and hide under the covers.

Jesus says the same thing to us as he said to Mary and Martha. 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

But how is it possible to live even though we die and what is it to believe and not know death. It is hard to understand life without first understanding death. There is the physical death when we stop breathing and our heart stops beating. But there is another kind of death, the death that happens when we find ourselves going through the motions of life. There is emotional and spiritual death that creeps up on us without our knowing. Our bodies continue to function, but we are leading a life of death.

A modern day example of this is in the movie 'Groundhog Day'. The main character finds himself stuck repeating the same day over and over again. After a period of frustration he goes through a period of resignation and simply goes through the motions, knowing that nothing he can do will change it. Then, towards the end, he decides to use his time for some new skills. He learns to play the piano, to speak another language and he pursues a young woman and falls in love. Soon he wakes up and finds that time has moved on and it is the day after Groundhog Day.

I am sure this is true of all of us – we lead our lives with little knowledge of what, if anything, has changed each day. We are not even aware that we are dead; we become entombed in our daily lives. The status quo has become like the strips of cloth that are wrapped around Lazarus. Each one binds us in place and we become unable to move. If we are frustrated with our lives it is the wrappings of death that cause us frustration.

Jesus offers us a new life. Not just a resuscitation of our old lives through knowledge or counselling or training, but actual resurrection to newness of life previously not experienced. Jesus tells us that he is that life. We know that we can cry out to Jesus as Mary and Martha did and we know that we have a God who loves us very much and will weep with us in our times of frustration and helplessness. And in reply the Word of God calls out to us like Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb.

Through word and sacrament we experience the power of Christ. In the words of hymns and scripture we hear God call us out the grave that is our everyday life. During worship we are refreshed with reminders of our forgiveness of sine and remembrance of our baptism. And we are nourished by the meal that Jesus hosts for us as we gather around the altar. Here is the place where we are reunited with God in the New Covenant – where God dwells with us in heaven on earth.

Jesus is calling us to love our neighbour, to minister to one another in the same way the people outside the tomb responded to Jesus ministering to Lazarus. We are called to compassion, to love, to grace and to faith.

We share the peace of the Lord with one another, not just because that is something we do in Church, but because when times are tough and we feel helpless and frustrated we need to know the peace of the Lord is indeed with us. So we extend our hands, reaching out as a physical sign that we help one another, we are there to remove the bandages and we are there to assist in the emergent from the tomb of a dead life.

We minister in our community providing food and shelter and supporting those less well off than ourselves because we know that these are the same

issues which keep us in bondage, wrapped around with the grave clothes. We respond to the call of Jesus to come out of the tomb, but we also respond to the call to unwrap Lazarus, our brother or Lazarus our sister who is struggling in their own lives.

Today is a day when we remember not only our neighbour, but our loves ones who have passed away. On All Saints Day we remember all those who have gone before us into the physical death. We remember their faith, the grace they were shown and the grace they showed to others. We remember their strength and their courage. We remember that through the Holy Spirit they were baptised into the Church of Christ, we remember that they have become part of the communion of saints. And we look forward to the resurrection of the body and give thanks for the life everlasting.

AMEN