

Sunday, November 4, 2018

All Saints' Sunday (Year B)

Isaiah 25.6-9; Revelation 21.1-6a; John 11.32-44

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On this day we specifically gather to remember all those who have gone before us in the faith. But in actuality, this is just one of three days dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints, martyrs, and all faithful departed believers. These three days, Halloween, All Saints Day (November 1), and All Souls Day (November 2), are collectively known as Hallowmas. The major feast day of this period is All Saints Day (which we transfer to today). In the ancient Christian custom, the celebration of major feast days often began with a vigil the night before, on the eve of, the feast day. Halloween, or All Hallows Eve, was originally the vigil celebration for All Hallows or All Saints Day. It has since taken on a life of its own, evolving into our secular celebration of ghouls and goblins and things that go bump in the night. Then we have the main event on All Saints Day, followed by All Souls Day, also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed.

On All Saints Day, we remember those we typically think of as saints, those who have been canonized, or specifically declared saints, by the Church. These include the likes of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Patrick, the Blessed Virgin Mary, etc. On All Souls Day, we remember all the faithful departed – all the “regular” folks who have died. Some churches, like ours, combine All Saints and All Souls into one celebration, remembering all the saints who have gone before, both known and unknown. In its truest sense, a saint is any faithful person – that is, all believers. That means each of us is a saint! In more recent times, the celebration of all these saints, both famous and ordinary, occurs on the Sunday immediately after All Saints Day, and is known as All Saints Sunday. This understanding is reflected in our collect for the day, which begins “Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord.” The elect being all those chosen for salvation through divine mercy. Given our understanding of God’s unbounded grace, love, and mercy, that means all are classified as the elect, as all are recipients of God’s grace, of God’s salvation.

So important to the life of the Church, the feast of All Saints is among the oldest of our Christian celebrations; the oldest being Easter, with the understanding that every Sunday is really a mini-Easter celebration of Christ’s Resurrection. Sometime in the fourth century, the Church established the celebration of All Saints to honor all the saints of the Church, especially the many unknown martyrs. Since then, the scope has expanded considerably, incorporating all saints famous and ordinary, all saints known and unknown. Yet, what remains, is the focus on the promise that all who are saints—all of us—will one day share in Christ’s Resurrection. The recognition that our lives of faith are informed by those saints who have gone before us to their heavenly reward. And that someday we will all be reunited in glory.

This promise of the resurrection and our sharing in it are central to all three of our lectionary readings for today. This is particularly evident in the readings from Isaiah and Revelation. As we heard in Isaiah: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines . . . And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast

over all peoples . . . he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces” (Is 25.6-8). A beautiful image of the end of the ages when all God’s people will be together in eternal life, gathered around a sumptuous banquet table, celebrating and rejoicing in their salvation.

The Revelation to St. John portrays a similar image. That of the end of the ages, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. When there will be a New Jerusalem, God’s home, where “He will dwell with them as their God; 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” (Rev. 21.3-4). And as a result, mourning, despair, and pain will be eliminated.

To be sure, these are visions, imaginings, taken from eschatological writings, seeking to convey something of what the end of the ages will be like. Both full of the hope and promise of salvation and eternal life. Of our sharing in Christ’s Resurrection. Each written to provide hope to beleaguered peoples—Isaiah writing to the people of Israel in Exile and John writing to early Christian communities under threat of persecution by the Roman Empire. While the images may differ somewhat, the theme is the same. That at the end of the ages, all God’s beloved children will be brought together, death will be destroyed, and all will share in Christ’s Resurrection. What that will actually look like, we have no idea.

But we get a little closer to the reality of sharing in Christ’s Resurrection and what that entails in our reading from the Gospel According to John. In two out of the three years of the lectionary cycle, our Gospel for All Saints Day are from the Beatitudes. But once every three years, we hear the story of the raising of Lazarus. A very different type of story, and one that perhaps touches us in more direct, personal ways. Particularly in an age when this commemoration conflates celebration of the famous saints with that of ordinary and unknown saints in our own personal lives. When we tend to think more of those saints in our own lives who have gone before us. Those saints who were known to us personally. Those saints who directly impacted our lives.

In this Gospel story, Jesus’ friend Lazarus had died four days before. The timing in and of itself is significant. According to Jewish belief, the soul of the dead person remains in the vicinity of the body for three days before finally departing. In noting Lazarus had been in the tomb four days, the Gospel writer is emphasizing that Lazarus is indeed truly dead. Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters, interact with Jesus upon his arrival—albeit too late to save their brother. There is obviously a lot of sorrow over the death of Lazarus. His sisters, as well as the gathered friends and family, are in mourning. Lots of tears are shed. And we can relate. We are meant to relate. This scene is meant to draw us into the experience. After all, we’ve all experienced the loss of loved ones.

The death of Lazarus is an archetype of what we all experience at one time or another. This scene depicts the reality of the pain of loss. The reality expressed in the tears by Mary and Martha and of those gathered. The reality expressed in Jesus being greatly disturbed, deeply moved, at what has happened. The reality expressed in Jesus responding to Mary and Martha’s tears with tears of his own. We know that tears are part of the essential work of grieving. That they are an outward sign of grieving. In Jesus’ own tears, he is empathizing with those who

grieve. He is validating and honoring the loss experienced. He is sanctifying the life of the deceased.

In his response, Jesus stands in solidarity with Mary and Martha, and with all who have experienced loss. His is a natural response to human suffering. His is a validation of the loss Mary and Martha, and the loss that we ourselves, have suffered. Yet, even as Jesus sympathizes, empathizes with the tears of Mary and Martha, with our own tears, Jesus knows what he will do. He has those present remove the stone from the cave. And after he prays to God, Jesus “cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ (Jn 11.43). And then, “the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.” (Jn 11.44a).

In this simple act—well, maybe not so simple for us, but simple for him—Jesus demonstrates his power over even death. He demonstrates his power to give new life. A power that will be proven in a more spectacular way in Jesus’ own death and Resurrection in a matter of days. In the raising of Lazarus, which happens a mere week or so before his own death, Jesus foreshadows his own Resurrection. Through the raising of Lazarus, Jesus offers the world a vision of what was foretold in Isaiah, of what will be foretold in Revelation, of the life in the age to come, when death, and the sorrow and weeping that accompany it, will be no more.

This raising of Lazarus was nothing compared to what Jesus will accomplish through his own Resurrection. This raising of Lazarus was the mere resuscitation of inanimate flesh. A returning of life to a dead body. A body that will continue to live a normal life span, only to die again. But with Jesus’ own Resurrection, this will take on a whole new meaning. For through his death and Resurrection, that gift of new life will be extended to all God’s beloveds. Not only will they have life, they will have eternal life. In that new and eternal life, they will no longer be bound by either sin or death. Sin and death will have no claim on us. They will have no meaning. Not ultimately.

Jesus then tells those watching in amazement, "Unbind him, and let him go" (Jn 11.44b). This is certainly a practical matter. Lazarus no longer needs to be bound in strips of burial cloth. But even more so, the unbinding of Lazarus is a powerful symbol of the liberation of resurrection. It is a sign that Lazarus is free to live into a new future that had been previously denied him by his untimely death.

The raising—or more aptly, the unbinding—of Lazarus holds a deep lesson for those of us who remain. Not just a foreshadowing of the promise of eternal life that we will share. But that we share in that eternal life even now. In ordering that Lazarus be unbound, Jesus is telling all of us that even in this life, we must be unbound. For God’s work of resurrection is not complete without our participation. Just as Lazarus is unbound, unencumbered by death, just as all the saints who have gone before lived lives unbounded, unencumbered by death, so too are we unbound, unencumbered by the specter of death. We are to be unbound from concern of sin and death so that we might be able to go forward and live into the resurrected life in all its fullness. Not that we will live into that eternal life in some distant future. But that we begin living into it even now. Guided by the example of all the saints who have paved the way through their example of faithful living in Christ.

This is the promise of the resurrected life. This is our opportunity to share in a new and eternal life, even now. But between now and the end of the ages, we continue to live with the tension between the hoped for promise of new and eternal life and the realities in which we find ourselves – a time where, despite knowing the promise, we continue to experience the very real pain of separation from those who have gone before.

While we celebrate those who have gone before, today's Gospel is a poignant reminder of our own place in the great cloud of witnesses. A reminder that we are not alone. That those who have gone before are still with us, still a part of the Body of Christ. That their example gives us guidance. That their example gives us hope. That their example unbinds us to live into the fullness of God's glory, now and in the age to come.