

Sermon for All Saints Sunday, November 3rd 2024

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee. (John Donne)*

These lines, written by the poet, John Donne describe the corporate nature of grief. The funeral bell tolls for you, even when it is not your funeral, because it is either the funeral of someone you were close to, or you know that people, close by, are suffering bereavement. We none of us live independently of each other and as we move through life the burden of loss grows.

Today, we are celebrating the Christian festivals of All Souls and All Saints (All Saints being the more important one). Many churches no longer pay much attention to these feasts. This has created a vacuum in which commerce has flourished. All Hallows has become Halloween – the realm of ghosts, witches Dracula, and many other costumes you can buy at your local supermarket. I am not one of those people who are against this. My grandchildren have enormous fun dressing up and going “trick or treating” – but the original, spiritual purpose of the festival is being lost. “Humankind cannot bear very much reality”, so we bury the serious, life-giving messages of All Saint’s Day, Christmas, Easter etc under shopping, tinsel, Easter Eggs and dressing up – and the supermarkets laugh all the way to the bank, whilst we are all the poorer, financially, emotionally and spiritually.

Possibly, probably, some of the fault lies with the Church. All Souls and All Saints are supposed to address death and grief and sainthood – a complex mix. Perhaps we clergy baulk at confronting such serious subjects. But I am going to try to do so today.

Before we move to our gospel, let me give a little explanation about what we mean by the word “saint”.

All Saints’ Day was originally set aside to commemorate all those martyrs from the early persecutions whose names were never recorded and thus whose memory was in constant peril of being lost. Over time, this celebration was extended to remember all who have lived and died in the faith and now rest from their labours.

A second dimension of the word “saint” was added during the Reformation by reclaiming the New Testament confession that all those who have been baptized into Christ are, in fact, living saints of God. In this regard, it is notable that the Apostle Paul addresses even the Christians in Corinth, those whom he has rebuked very firmly for many and various moral offenses, as saints, or holy ones, because they had been baptised.

When I was preparing for the sermon, my mind went back to an ordinary person from this congregation, who was a saint to me. When I was eleven and started coming to St Mary’s all by myself, someone noticed. A lovely lady called Mrs Gleadle - some of you may just remember her – started taking me out to talk things Christian, during the boring bits of the adult service. We sat solemnly in the vicar’s vestry. Week by week Mrs Gleadle missed much of her own Sunday worship to look after me. I don’t remember anything of what we talked about. What I knew was that someone was interested in me and caring for me. I have never forgotten Mrs Gleadle and her generosity to me. For me, one of God’s ordinary saints.

“Each man’s death diminishes me
For I am involved in mankind.”

We are involved in humankind, all of us, because no man is an island. When someone we love dies, not only do we experience our own individual grief but our community of friends loses that person, too. That is why the Church and all major faiths have festivals and rituals that recognise grief and loss. Death is a corporate affair.

Our gospel from St John, the Raising of Lazarus, recognises that grief is a community affair. It is not just about Jesus and Lazarus. There are a lot of other people in the story as well.

We do not have miracles in John's gospel. We have what John calls "Signs". The Raising of Lazarus is the last Sign Jesus performs before he is arrested and killed. Because it is the last Sign before his own death the way Jesus addresses death and grief at this point is significant.

In the story of Lazarus, the evangelist changes his usual pattern when writing of a Sign. The usual pattern is that Jesus notices or has brought to his attention, a need – as in the Signs at the Marriage at Cana when Jesus turns Water into Wine or the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Jesus performs the Sign and then onlookers respond to what they have seen and sometimes Jesus discourses on it. All this is reversed here. The discourse between Jesus and his disciples, about what is happening to Lazarus, comes first. When we get to Bethany the onlookers, the friends of Martha, Mary and Lazarus are discussing why Jesus has not come? Mary and Martha also challenge Jesus. This changes the emphasis of the whole story. The narrative concentrates for 42 verses out of 44 on questions of grief and loss, confusion, fear and dismay, all of which are characteristic reactions to death. Forty-two verses on grief and loss and only two verses to the actual Sign of the raising of Lazarus.

In John's story, we see Jesus in the presence of grief and experiencing grief himself. What difference might that make to us that Jesus feels grief? Jesus feels the loss of Lazarus, his friend. He feels the grief of Mary, Martha and their whole community. Perhaps Jesus is also grieving for his coming death? When Jesus gets to the tomb he is described as being disturbed in spirit, greatly moved and he weeps. Why does he weep? We can't say exactly. All we know is that he grieves and that this is more than just an expression of empathy. Why should the Son of God grieve like this? Because Jesus can't take grief away. Yes, the Resurrection will overcome death but still death has to happen. Jesus knows that he can't take away the pain, the sorrow, the loss that you and I feel when someone we love dies. Jesus can't take away the grief that surrounds death - and for me that's very comforting. I really appreciate that this gospel on this Sunday, centres particularly on the shared grief that Jesus understands.

It is often said that Christians live "Between the times." The time of Jesus' coming and the time of his return. We believe in the resurrection but live with the daily reality of death. We look at our world: its grief, its confusion, and we cry out, "Why doesn't God do something?" When Jesus doesn't go immediately to his friend, Lazarus, we hear in the conversations the disciples have,

confusion. When Jesus delays coming immediately to Mary and Martha they ask, "Why didn't you come?" It is hard for us to accept that death can't be wiped out or taken away or at least, not yet. But for God to experience that for me is one of the most amazing aspects of the incarnation. Death is supposed to be the great division between God and us, according to the Old Testament. What makes God, God and not human is that God cannot die. But God takes on death on the cross in Jesus Christ and God through Jesus shares our experience of human grief as we see in the story of the Raising of Lazarus.

But we are a people of hope: the people of the Resurrection – an Easter people. On the third day the tomb of Jesus was empty.

You know, I love our churchyard. My own mother's ashes are buried here. Many, many good friends' remains are interred here. But you do know, don't you, that our churchyard is empty? No one is there. All our loved ones are alive with and in God Almighty. I love our churchyard. I speak to my Mum here. It is a sacred place in which to remember, give thanks and pray for all our saints. We need this sacred space. But along with the angel at Jesus tomb, we can say "He or she is not here. They have gone ahead of you. You will see them."

I hope you will not think me too self-indulgent if I finish with another of John Donne's poems.

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, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.