

All Saints Day

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All Saints Day – Isa 25 6-9 Ps 24 Rev 21 1-6a Jn 11 32-44

There are lots of tears in today's readings. Every time, the tears are a precursor to God's rescue. And that seems to be central to the teaching of all religion; all human faith vows and declares that suffering is not the final reality; it *will* be overcome. So on All Saints' Day, we are offered these texts as expressions of hope in the face of suffering. That's one way we read the Scriptures; as God's will and testament for the living to live, for suffering to end, and for death itself to die. It's the story of the trials and sufferings that God and we have all been through together, and it leads to the good news that at the end, "...those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy." ^{Ps 126.6}

Human faith declares that suffering is not the final reality. But there's a time and a place for this to be said, and there's a time when it's not yet right to proclaim hope. When you're in the depths of despair; you've just lost a friend, a child, a partner; you've just lost a job or missed a life-changing opportunity; your doctor has just told you your own death is near ... at these raw moments of agony, it's not the time for someone to demand that you put your hope in a happy hereafter. That sort of insensitive prating is quite frankly obscene.

What they're actually saying to you is that *your* sorrow makes *them* uncomfortable, and you'd better cheer up for everybody else's sake – though they'll tell you it's for your own good. But that's not what these texts are saying at all. The tears of Isaiah ... the tears of Revelation ... the tears Jesus shares with his friends...in these writings, tears are acknowledged as a natural part of our existence; as something fundamental to

our being human. In fact, if we had no tears, we would be less than human; and paradoxically, if we had no tears, we'd miss out on each intimate moment of contact with the God who collects each precious tear in his bottle. ^{Psalms 56.8} – God who promises to wipe them away

That's what makes Jesus the ideal pastoral caregiver in today's gospel reading. He doesn't arrive at the mourning village of Mary, Martha and Lazarus rolling with optimistic good cheer. Jesus saw the pain in their faces, and he immediately shouldered his share of the burden of grief that everyone else was carrying.

He groaned under its weight with them. *When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the people who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved ... Jesus began to weep. Why? Surely he knew about the hope?*

He did it because the person you need with you when you're sad is not someone who tries to put away your burden so you can't hold onto it; not someone who tells you to think of a future when all this will seem far away. No, those people you *don't* want. There's a rich time of privacy in grief; there's deep intimacy in grief; there's the fulness of your own humanity to be experienced there, and no-one should presume to take it from you. No-one else owns it like you do, and they shouldn't pretend that they do. And nor should they tell you to stop feeling it or expressing it. Instead, we find Jesus shouldering the very same burden of grief as we are carrying, and groaning under its weight *with us*. He literally shares our own grief with us. That's who you want with you when you're sad; someone who *does* know how you're feeling; someone unobtrusive, but right there with you in it.

What does this have to do with All Saints Day? It's got something to do with the unobtrusive, quiet character of a true saint. I've said before that the writer Elizabeth Johnson calls the feast of All Saints by a name which captures this

privacy and intimacy wonderfully; she calls it the *Feast of the Splendid Nobodies*. It's the day when we celebrate all the un-named little people who have quietly lived out lives that have contributed to the dignity of humanity. The sort of people who make space in their lives to stand by us when we grieve; people who stand up for the ones who grieve. People we know; people we've known; and thanks to our Lord, even us, as we are known by the ones who love us. The *Feast of the Splendid Nobodies*.

These are the people who for us truly reflect the nature of Jesus; the ones who give us permission for our tears; the ones brave enough to sit with the discomfort of accompanying us in our times of sadness; the ones humble enough to share our moments of joy, yet without taking either of those moments over. The saints are the ones who truly reflect God's love for us; always there, unobtrusive, rock solid – splendid nobodies, and All of them, Saints. Amen.