

The Feast of All Saints

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

All Saints – B 31-10-2021 John 11.32-44

Isa 25.7 The Lord will destroy ... the shroud that is cast over all peoples ...⁸ the Lord will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces

Since WW2, probably now is the only time this image of a shroud that is spread over all nations can be sensed in this country – the shroud of Covid-19, and the shroud of human-induced planet-wide annihilation. Everyone is threatened with the kind of danger that is normally only faced in a time of war. Death threatens.

Today – All Saints' Day – we hear the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The raising of Lazarus is a startling confirmation of the power Jesus claimed over death when he said: *Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*^{Jn 5:25} We've just seen Lazarus hear that voice, and we'll all hear it ourselves one day. So today it's time to talk about what happens when loved ones die.

One of the central things Christians believe is that Jesus gives believers eternal life. John's gospel speaks of this gift often. ^(Jn 3.16,17,36, 4.14,36, 5.24,39, 6.27,40,47,54,68, 10.28, 12.25,50, 17.2,3) The special meaning of this gift that we celebrate today is that our loved ones who've died are not dead to God. Even though, to us, our loved ones are gone for now, we believe that they are alive in the presence of God. To us, they rest in peace, awaiting the last day; the day when all will be raised and Jesus will come a second time to judge the living and the dead. We may be constrained in time, but time is within God.

So both the living and the dead are present to God.

This means that all the people around the world who gather for worship today are not the whole Church. On All Saints' Day, we celebrate a Church that is much bigger than we can see. We look around at each other today and we see visible *saints*. But we don't just gather with the believers we can see. We believe we're also surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (μαρτυρεῖτε), as our prayer book says every saint's day. I'm sure I sometimes hear them joining in when we sing together.

These invisible witnesses are in God's presence – veiled from us, but alive to God. Our Scripture sentence today from Revelation gives us a fabulous vision of what we'll see when the veil is removed: *I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...*^{Rev 7.9}

It's a huge vision; a vision of what Jesus' work finally achieves; the consummation of the great search and rescue mission that each and every one of us is engaged in.

I marvel at this; that we each have a part to play in something so huge – a movement that means we and that countless multitude of saints can celebrate the end of all bitter tears – can celebrate an eternity of joyful peace in the company of those we love, and in the presence of the God who loves us and wants us together like this!

In today's Gospel, we see the face of the God who makes it all happen. There are tears of deep compassion on that face! Jesus weeps with his friends in their grief – the same Jesus who summons his dead friend from the grave. Jesus weeps for the death of Lazarus and for the pain of those who love him. Jesus shows us God's compassion for you and me. And out of that compassion, Jesus acts with appalling power. Jesus' tears are the compassion God feels for the suffering of all the living.

And his summons to Lazarus to come out from the tomb is what Jesus will call each one of us to do.

What will that day be like? When I think about this mighty sign of Lazarus's raising, I'm reminded of Ezekiel's thundering oracle: *Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.* Ezek 37.13-14

The raising of Lazarus is a story of what God does – the lengths God goes to – to make faith possible for us – to make possible a free relationship between a frail, half-seeing person and our God who loves us. In Jesus, God comes and cries our tears with us, and in God's time, will come to our graves and call us out from them.

These are not stories made up to create a system of belief. They are genuine stories told by people who experienced them as Good News – written down so that we might be encouraged by this Good News and have some hope in our lives that is greater than just an end to grief. And these stories which hold the rumour of God's love for this world – these stories have been preserved, experienced, lived and told by generations down the ages – continuing with us – the saints.

These people are all the saints whom we honour today – the billions of ordinary people down through the ages who have lived and transmitted to us the resurrection faith; our hope of an eternal life of peace and joy with our loved ones under the delighted smile of our God. Thus the beautiful 27th Psalm says, *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.* Ps 27.13

So, with all the saints, we praise our God through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.