



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Feast of All Saints – November 7, 2021

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

All Saints' day is one of the principal feasts of the church. You might wonder why, so let me suggest a few things.

First, I'd say that on this day we're reminded that no Christian is alone. By virtue of our baptisms – a loving sacrament that marks the entrance of each person to Christian community - we join a great family – a family of saints – all part of the Body of Christ – alive and past - in the words of Charles Wesley:

One family, we dwell in him,
one Church, above, beneath;
though now divided by the stream,
the narrow stream of death.

So that's what we celebrate on this All Saints' Day and that's also why we commemorate the Faithful Departed on All Souls' Day both celebrate this mutual belonging.

Secondly, it's also a day when we intentionally try and learn something about what it is to be a person of Christian faith in this world: All Saints' Day celebrates the people in whose lives the Church has seen the grace and the love of God powerfully at work. It is an opportunity to give thanks for that grace, and for the wonderful ends to which it shapes a human life; it is a time to be encouraged by the example of the saints and to recall that holiness takes many forms and exists in the ordinariness of our lives as well as the extraordinariness of some lives.

And thirdly, the feast of All Souls allows us to remember with thanksgiving before God those whom we have known more directly: those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith.

I always especially give thanks for my Grandmother on this day – she was very dear to me and in her way showed me how to live my faith. I'm sure you have people who you remember in the same way with love and with gratitude.

All of this was in my mind as I prepared to preach today. And it gave me a particular lens as I read the Gospel for All Saints' Day – the raising of Lazarus. This is a really powerful story. It's powerful for all sorts of reasons: it was the culmination of many signs that Jesus was who he said he was – the Messiah – that he had the power over life and death. It was the sign that told the religious authorities that this man was super dangerous to their power structures. They feared a rebellion. It was important for other reasons too. In this story, we see Mary express real hurt and anger at Jesus' apparent lack of care for her and Martha and of course Lazarus himself. I'm reminded of a beautiful sermon that Rowan Williams preached after the devastating earthquake in Christ Church New Zealand where he said this:

The reading begins with one of the sharpest cries of criticism and protest against Jesus that we meet anywhere in the Gospels. "If you had been here," says Mary accusingly, "my brother would not have died." So where were you?

In the wake of any kind of suffering, disaster and loss, it's the question that springs to the lips of all of us, . . . it's as if the personal feeling of countless human hearts is given expression. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died.' And so where were you?

The first thing that we might take from the Gospel reading, therefore, is that God doesn't seem to want to silence our questions. Jesus doesn't round on Mary and say, 'Shut up, you don't know what you're talking about'; he doesn't say, 'Don't ask me awkward questions'. What does he say? He says, 'Take me to where the body is. Take me to where it hurts most.' 'Come and see', says Mary. And when our cries of protest rise to God about suffering in our own lives, suffering in the world, suffering in our neighbours, that's the challenge of the Gospel. Are we able, like Mary, to say, 'Come and see. Come on God, come on Jesus, I'll take you to where it hurts most. I lay bare my heart, my circumstances to you. Come and see.' God does not shut us up, God does not say, 'Don't ask awkward questions', but he invites us to invite him to see, to witness. And what happens next in what is famously the shortest verse in the Bible is that Jesus wept, . . .

He weeps. His first reaction is that he has indeed come and seen. And he weeps. He expresses his solidarity, his absorption of the pain. He says, 'This is mine too'. Jesus says, 'I am not a God who lives far away in a distant heaven to whom all these sufferings on earth are a matter of indifference. What touches you, touches me, and I am going to be there where it hurts most. And you invite me to be with you where it hurts most. Know that I carry that grief in my love.'

And that's how the saints of God also respond – we say in the name of Jesus, 'Take us to where it hurts most. Let us come and see.' And we say, 'Trust and you will see. Something will be uncovered for you in the middle of all this. In the middle of the pain, the grief, and the confusion.' This is how we respond in a God-like, a Christ-like way to the challenges of the world's pain, the world's suffering, to our own wretchedness and muddle.

The saints are called to "be a sign of promise, and say, 'You will see something if you hold on'." Because of course, that's right.

It reminds me of the classic definition of a saint: A saint is like a stained glass window through which the sunlight shines and makes its colours vibrant – so the life of a saint is one in which the light of Christ shines through showing God's love to the world.

Their love shows that God's love is not only eternal, but it's also occurring in the present.

It's real and substantial and affects how we live every day. The work of the saints – that's all of us – is now. We just spent a day reviewing, celebrating and planning for the work of the saints in our Synod this past Saturday – in which we hope and pray the light of Christ can be seen. In opposing unjust and sinful structures that flourish in our society such as human trafficking, racism and so many other evils, we pray that we may be the face and hands of Christ.

And what we will see is that God's mission lives and a new creation is being born. Our work joins hands with the work of all the Saints to co-create the kingdom in the world that God loves so much. We trust, as Dr. Williams says,

in the belief that [we will] see something change. In that sense [we are] standing where Jesus stands in this morning's Gospel: not denying the confusion, the hurt, or the pain, but going where it hurts most, and above all, promising, promising glory, promising vision, promising the new life that bursts out at the end of the Gospel story, when Jesus speaks his great words, 'Lazarus, come out!' And the dead man comes out, and life is restored. A change greater than anyone could have expected arises out of that blur and swamp of anger, accusation, and confusion in which the story begins.

It's perhaps why St John's Gospel is for so many Christians so very dear to them. Jesus is on trial. Jesus stands before his accusers receiving and absorbing the questions and the accusations that they throw at him. But instead of embarking on self-justification, instead of trying to avoid the question, instead of trying to silence people, he lets them speak until they run out into silence. And then he just says, 'Take me where it hurts. Trust and you will see.'

For all those who have helped us to see, and have been with us in those moments, thanks be to God. They are around us this morning, living or departed, as we celebrate this feast of new life, as we affirm the great change that Jesus brings, taking into ourselves his life as our food and drink.

Thanks be to God for this and all God's mercies. Amen.