



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday before Advent All Saints Sunday

Revelation 21.1-6a

John 11.32-44

It is the Fourth Sunday before Advent, Christmas is drawing nearer. This Sunday is of course all Hallows Eve but it is generally kept as All Saints Sunday. All Saints Day is of course Monday and All Souls the 2nd of November. I had a choice about what to do for my Reflection so I chose All Saint's Sunday and the above readings.

Often the gospel reading set for All Saints is The Beatitudes. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount we have the essence of Christian behaviour and then how we need to live it out in our everyday lives. That is what the Saints did- they put their Christian faith into practice. That is what we are all called to do – indeed Saint Paul refers to all believers as 'saints.' It wasn't until I looked up those references that I realised he did so, something like, thirty nine times.

When we think of the word 'saint' we think of those Christians who lived pretty nearly perfect lives or who were martyred for their faith and canonised by the Roman Catholic Church. Actually saints are human beings who try their best to follow Jesus. As we have seen in the readings over recent weeks the disciples do not always behave in very saintly ways. These are just ordinary men who want to follow Jesus but get it wrong sometimes as we all do. Think of Peter who tried to impose his own will on Jesus and who was admonished with the words, 'Get behind me Satan,' think of the disciples rowing about who was greatest or James and John wanting to sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory; in other words only interested in power and status.

We all get it wrong sometimes but it is our motivation, our desire to do what Jesus wants us to do that counts. To put it another way (though not politically correct) 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for.' We all fail but when we look at the lives of the saints, ordinary people

who tried to follow Jesus, sometimes paying the ultimate price for their faith, they are examples to us.

This gospel passage is about death, the death of a beloved friend of Jesus. Jesus' friend Lazarus was seriously ill Martha and Mary sent a message for Jesus to come to cure him.

^{11.4}But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.'

That delay must have been agony for the sisters who must watch their brother die. What a strain that would put on anyone's faith, the words, 'Why, why, why?' must have echoed around that house.

Jesus deliberately delays and Lazarus dies. Jesus knows that this will happen but he knows the outcome too, 'It is for God's glory.'

Lazarus was dead for real there is no mistake about this. The professional wailing women were there. Because of Jesus' delay he had been dead for four days. The account is pretty graphic and John makes it so deliberately. There must be no doubt about the reality of the death. Everyone would have expected the body to putrefy very quickly. That is why burials in hot countries are almost immediate. Yet Jesus deliberately delays. He knows what he is doing; he prays that his Father will answer him.

It is a mistake to think that beliefs in Jesus' time were uniform. They weren't any more than now. The Pharisees and the Sadducees are sometimes lumped together but they shouldn't be. Their beliefs were miles apart.

The Pharisees were a solely religious group; they were content with any political government which allowed them to carry out the ceremonial law. They believed in a resurrection. On the last day the dead would rise with new bodies to an ideal world, God's new world, a world without pain and grief. Most Jews would have believed this.

The Sadducees were far fewer, but very wealthy and therefore powerful. Priests and aristocrats were usually Sadducees. So mainly they collaborated with Rome. They didn't want to lose either wealth or power. They didn't want anyone rocking the boat and so they didn't want Jesus. It was dangerous for Jesus now, his disciples have warned him of the danger but Jesus knows what has to be done.

Once Jesus has made up his mind there is no going back, Bethany we know is only two miles from Jerusalem, it is nearing Passover the area would be crowded. It is dangerous but Jesus has a mission to complete. It is interesting to see Martha's behaviour, since her ticking off in the earlier account we have of her. It is noticeable that it is Martha who takes the leading role initially just prior to our reading, when she meets Jesus on the road. Yes there is the very natural questioning of Jesus, Why did you delay?

²⁰'When Martha heard that Jesus was coming; she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

²¹Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

We have to think of the enormity of this death. Lazarus was young, not an old man. He is the breadwinner. Once he is dead the sisters could have faced destitution. Martha knows Jesus' power; she believes Jesus could have saved her brother. Yet in the very next sentence she speaks amazing words. It is one thing to heal someone, it is quite another to restore a life. Only God can do that – and that of course is the point. Her words are a huge statement of faith.

²² 'But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.'

Jesus' next words are stunning; they are the opening words of the funeral service to this day, the promise of new life with God.

²⁵ 'Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

It is always worth putting a reading in its context. Martha's faith is absolute.

Mary comes to Jesus now and the scene is set. Once again the words are repeated by her. 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. '

This is one of the rare passages in the gospels as in Gethsemane where we see Jesus' deep emotion; 'he was greatly disturbed in Spirit and deeply moved.' This scene is a deeply moving one. Anyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one will know the reality and hurt that comes with such grief.

³⁴'He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'

Now the fact that Lazarus had been in the grave for four days is important. Jewish belief was that the soul departed the body after three days. Lazarus, they believed, would be in that shadowy region known as Sheol where there was no more relationship with God. It is not as if he has just died. This is not a normal loss either. It is a tragedy –Lazarus was cut off in his prime.

Jesus is quite specific in his instructions and the action he is about to take is for the glory of God and for the benefit of the people who will see this miracle,

⁴¹'So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.'

Jesus says the action of the raising of Lazarus is to glorify God in front of the crowd that they might believe.' Jesus, visibly moved, then calls the dead man by his name. 'Lazarus come out'. And the dead man lives. Remember the words of Isaiah 43

'Do not be afraid, I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name. You are mine.'

This is one of the most stunning of the gospel accounts, ⁴⁴“The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’

The words unbind him and let him go echo Jesus’ action by his death at Calvary. Through his death he unbinds humanity from sin. He releases us and lets us go!

The raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection and it is vital that it does so. Jesus has power over death itself. But it is different; the raising of Lazarus is only resuscitation. Lazarus will obey the cycle of life. He will die again.

On Good Friday Jesus gave up his life for us, he suffered death and was buried. He, like Lazarus died – that is why this reading is often set on Passion Sunday. But at his resurrection on the first Easter Morning death became eternal life. Jesus has triumphed over death forever.

Christians throughout the centuries have tried to live the way of Christ and they placed their hope in the resurrection. The risen Christ is central to our faith – St. Paul says without the resurrection we are ‘of all people most to be pitied.’ BUT Christ was raised and the world was changed forever.

Our New Testament reading is from Revelation. St. John is writing using imagery. His visions are given here to us. This passage may be familiar to us because it is sometimes used with a funeral service. We can see why,

⁴ ‘he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.’

We see here the tenderness of our God and his love for all his children. The wiping away of tears is one of the kindest of actions. The whole passage itself is one of metaphor. It is good to read it in the light of the gospel of John chapter 1.

¹ ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’

This word is Jesus, co-creator with God in the beginning. It tells of the incarnation, when Jesus, human and divine lived amongst us.

¹⁴ ‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.’

The reading is cosmic as indeed is this reading from Revelation.

Throughout these Reflections we have seen that Jesus heralded God’s new creation and that in time all would be perfected. Jesus would return again as ruler of the new perfected order.

^{21.1} ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.’

This passage from Revelation deals with the vision that John has received. We are used to thinking of earth being here and heaven somewhere above. Actually if you think of Genesis 1.1 ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,’ the phrase ‘the heavens and the earth’ means the totality of the created order—not ‘the heavens’ as the dwelling place of God against “the earth” as the dwelling place of humans. The ‘heavens and the earth’ simply means everything.

The point is that God is, ‘Making all things new.’ This is God’s new creation. All things are renewed; heaven and earth. The ‘sea’ here is a metaphor for all that is evil and it is often used thus throughout the bible.

There is a covenant here, that is a promise. At a wedding ceremony the bride and groom make solemn promises to each other all bound up in the words ‘to love.’ Love envelopes a marriage ceremony as God’s love envelopes all of us and his creation.

It is not that the followers of Jesus leave this world because it is flawed and go to another sphere, heaven. No, the new heaven and new earth come together and all is transformed in God’s new creation.”

God created this world and his creation is good, ‘the world is shot through with the glory of God.’ What is wrong is sin and all that is destructive. In God’s new creation there will be no room for that.

³‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;’

God will dwell with us and therefore suffering can be no more. All is renewed.

⁴‘he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’

Jesus came to walk with us at the incarnation, he sent the Holy Spirit to be with us. Jesus has conquered death and sin, now in God’s new creation all comes to fruition. God is with us and all evil is vanquished, there is no need for crying; all suffering, all evil has been destroyed. The wonder of God’s created order now marred by sin will be perfected.

The last part of this reading has God addressing John directly.

⁵ ‘And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ ⁶ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’

Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, Omega is the last. Often these letters are seen on Priest’s vestments or the Pascal candle. It means that God is first and last, thus all encompassing. God is the creator, the source of all things, the ending of all things, he is our goal and our life. This

marries with Revelation 22.13 when Jesus says, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'

How similar is this to John 1 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.'

The promise of God is 'See I am making all things new.' This new creation is the fulfilment of God's promises. All his creation which is basically good but has been marred by sin and evil will be restored and made as he wishes it. Jesus will reign as king in this new creation. We will be his people and he will be our God.

'The day in whose clear shining light all wrong shall stand revealed, when justice shall be throned in might and ev'ry hurt be healed. When knowledge hand in hand with peace, shall walk the earth abroad, the day of perfect righteousness, the promised day of God.' F.L.Hosmer

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