

Sunday 1 November: All Saints/All Souls

Saints in Light

Readings: Revelation 21.1-6a; John 11.32-44



“Be praised my Lord for our sister the death of the body,
From whom no one living is able to flee.”

These are the words of St. Francis of Assisi at the end of his incredible song of praise – the Canticle of the Sun. Francis’ words speak of a relationship with death, presenting death not as the alien enemy, the grim reaper we fear, but someone we must know intimately as part of our family – a beloved sister – leading us onwards into God’s unknown. Francis says “blessed are those who are found doing the will of God, for death will do them no harm.”

For anyone who has been through a painful bereavement these words may seem so impossible to accept. How can we give praise to God when our whole being is rebelling against the loss? C.S. Lewis, in the beginning of *A Grief Observed* describes the violence of this loss and “the agonising jabs of red hot memory” – a God who seems more like a torturer.

He writes: “Where is God? Go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once.”

Our Gospel today tells us the story of a death. To begin with, it is a story with which anyone who has gone through a tragic bereavement can readily identify: the beloved brother of Mary and Martha, Lazarus, is dead. It is the sickening reality of irreversible loss. Jesus has arrived on the scene too late. The desperate hope and prayer that something could possibly change, the hope of some miraculous reprieve or intervention, has ended in despair. Jesus’ late arrival serves to highlight the failure of God. Jesus himself seems powerless, not the saviour for which they have waited, but one of the grieving. He weeps. And, as often happens at a time of death, alongside this sense of powerlessness we see the beginning of anger and blame – when we are so unable to change the loss then we often blame ourselves or find someone else to blame. Here, the accusation is negligence: couldn’t this Jesus who had opened the eyes of the blind have arrived in time, couldn’t he have kept this man, who he claims to love, from dying?

This death is real and palpable. It is like all real death, irreversible. The life has gone out of him. A cold dead body in a cave, blocked up by a stone. Dead, grey flesh, dulled blank eyes, no breath. We are told that he has been dead for four days; they warn Jesus not to open the tomb for fear of the stench. The beloved friend is now a dead decomposing body.

But it is now, from this graphic reality of real human loss and grief, that Christ calls the name of Lazarus – just as later, three days after his own death, he will call the name of Mary: a name reaching beyond and across death; a name called by the one who knows each of our names. He calls the name of the one who is dead. He calls in love, calling through the divide, into the dark cave which had been blocked and which you thought could never be opened... calling into life. “Lazarus, come out!” I think those words are addressed not just to Lazarus but to all of us. “Come out!”... Come out of the darkness, come out of all that you thought was irreversible, come out of grief, come out of guilt and your sense that you can never be forgiven, or ever love again. Come out of death. Breathe the breath of Christ’s life. Imagine those grave-clothes holding and binding you in grief and making you believe that you will never be free again. These words are spoken to you: “Unbind her, let her go free!”; “Unbind him, let him go free!” That is the very essence and nature of God’s love for us. This is the Gospel.

Isn’t that the longing of those from whom we are parted for us too? When the stone blocks us, when the grave-clothes, of death, or loss or longing, or unforgiveness, bind us, when it may seem that there is no beyond or no future, it is there at this grave that Christ’s calls us to see the resurrection and the life he brings. John, the evangelist, who tells us this story, as he contemplated his own experience of the death and resurrection of Christ on the island of Patmos, was to know deeply, beyond all human reason, that same revelation of God’s love: life and death not as two divided and separate worlds – the one blocking and locked to the other, but as one reality: a new heaven and a new earth, inseparable; heaven opened on earth and earth opened and one with heaven.

We heard these words in our reading:
“See the home of God is among mortals
He will dwell with them
They will be his peoples
He will wipe every tear from their eyes
Death will be no more.
Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

At the National Gallery, I have a season ticket, and have been going again and again to see an exhibition on at the moment entitled *The Sacred Made Real*. The exhibition seems so alarmingly graphic and gory: these sixteenth century Spanish paintings and sculptures depict graphically the reality of Christ’s human suffering. The wounding and crucifixion is made too real, leading us through Christ’s human agony to a stone slab on which we see Christ’s corpse laid out like a body at a mortuary, displaying all the signs of death: his bruised flayed flesh, pulped knees, glazed eyes, lifeless body. If the story had ended here on this cold slab, this exhibition would be like the chamber of horrors: nothing sacred in that. But Jesus Christ does not end on the cross or on this slab. The reason I have been coming back to this exhibition time and time again is not to see a brutal death but to see and feel the tenderness and compassion that Christ elicits; in particular to stand in front of another picture. It is the picture, a small copy of which you were given when you came into the church today. It is a picture of St. Francis by Francisco de Zurbarán.

Francis is standing so still, looking up. It is as though he is transformed by a vision of God's love above him. Only his face shows out from his habit, and there seems a complete humility and openness in his posture. For me it illustrates that phrase "The saints in light". Half of Francis' face is in intense shadow, but the other half of his face is transformed by a warmth of light – like the moon softly illuminated by the light of the sun. The light flows down from head to toe, his brown habit soaking up the glow of God's love. His face is so at peace it is as though he is a simple earthen vessel filled by God. And as you look at the picture you realise that Francis' face seems to mirror Christ's face. This picture depicts a vision of Pope Nicholas V, who visited St. Francis grave two hundred years after his death, and was confronted by this standing figure of Francis in prayer.

We know that God is light, but we know too that sometimes in order to see that light we have to pass through the most profound darkness. When we celebrate the saints we find in their lives not perfect caricatures of holiness and virtue. Real saints are real fallible people. But real saints are those who, by their lives, open the door, and let God's light into the world; who let his light flow from the eternal into the here and now, illuminating our world. When Francis sang the Canticle of the Sun, praising God for the beauty of creation, at the same time, he was facing the most painful physical blindness, and the Community he had founded was tearing itself apart. He was no saintly escapist. The darkness which reveals the light is often very deep.

Next year, for the first time, on 24th April, seven of the members of my own Community, The Melanesian Brotherhood, will be remembered in the Anglican Communion as 21st century martyrs of the Church: those who inspired others to holiness by letting God's light shine through them. I know they were simply human people like you and me, with the same mix of strengths and weaknesses, men you would have walked past without noticing, but they were able, for a moment, to open the door of God's peace, and thus for eternity to reveal God's love. At the Lambeth Conference at Canterbury Cathedral, where they were remembered, I saw bishops from around the world kneeling in front of an icon of them. How strange that in the brutal deaths of these young men we can glimpse something which is life-giving. At the time a friend of mine wrote to me: "I think it is your testimony that seven good, humble and faithful men died because they were devoted to one another and to Christ which simultaneously causes so much pain but affords so much hope." In Christ even the terrible darkness of a crucifixion can indeed become the beginning of resurrection.

In your service sheets today you will be able to read some passages telling of people who have gone before us: unique and very human like all of us. But as you read these brief memories you will see also people whose love and lives reflect something of Christ, and how indeed they too like St. Francis can shine like saints in light: Kenneth's love for his wife and sons; Vera's indefatigable prayerfulness; David's gift of pastoral care and engagement with and interest in others; Zafar, the rare gem who loved and cherished family, friends and life itself; Miranda, who faced sickness and trials with smiles and laughter and care for others; Kath, the life-long pilgrim, who in the face of darkness built community which included the excluded and many more: each person, made in God's image and capable of being a glimpse of the height, breadth and depth of God's love. You will see that the dialogue of love continues beyond death and that the door is not locked, but open. And perhaps we too, like St. Francis, will be able to glimpse how blessed are those who are found doing God's will, for death will do them no harm.