

**31<sup>st</sup> October 2021**  
**John 11:32-44 and Revelation 21: 1-6**

On this Sunday, each year the church celebrates All Saints Day. There are all sorts of definitions about what a saint is, which speak of extreme holiness and virtuousness but there is another meaning which relates directly to us - those who believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Saints are referenced in the bible. For example, Philippians 4:21 says in the NRSV "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus". The Greek word Hagios is used, which means set apart, holy or sacred. So, the idea of sainthood existed long before the tradition of canonisation.

I've always had a bit of trouble defining the difference between All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day. This is what the Church of England says about it in its introduction to the time between All Saints and Advent. "No Christian is solitary. Through baptism we become members one of another in Christ, members of a company of saints whose mutual belonging transcends death: All Saints' Day and the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed on All Souls' Day both celebrate this mutual belonging. All Saints' Day celebrates men and women in whose lives the Church as a whole has seen the grace 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 sanctity may grow in the

ordinary circumstances, as well as the extraordinary crises, of human living. The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed celebrates the saints in a more local and intimate key. It 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". Paul refers to all those who follow Jesus faithfully as saints. We can only pray that we live up to that title and that others can see the grace of God working through us and in us.

The Gospel story today picks up from where Jesus has heard that Lazarus, his friend and brother of Mary and Martha is sick. Jesus has delayed going to him for two days, and by the time he gets there Lazarus is already dead and buried, his family and friends in mourning. In some translations it reads that a deep anger welled up in Jesus at the death of his friend. He was obviously very moved by Lazarus' death and the sorrow of his friends. This is an indication of Jesus' humanity, but we shouldn't overlook the fact that Jesus was equally divine. God himself shares our grief and is offended by the havoc that death wreaks. Death is a fact of life, and a sign of the fallen state of God's creation. This is not what God had planned for his creation, and his new creation as we heard in the reading from Revelation sets this right. I would hazard a guess that everyone listening has experienced the loss of someone they love. Jesus has shared that experience with us.

The shortest verse in the Bible is contained in today's Gospel reading – 'Jesus wept'. Those two short words tell us a great deal about the man Jesus and about God himself. As it says in Isaiah 53, Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. He cried at the loss of his friend and the grief that loss brought. When we remind ourselves that Jesus is God, we see that God himself grieves with us. I sometimes think that in the West we have tried to sanitise death. Funerals have become 'celebrations' of a life, bright clothes are worn. Everyone is trying to hide the fact that a loss has been suffered. A loss that profoundly hurts, but we try to hide our grief so as not to make others uncomfortable. Maybe the eastern cultures have got it right – they rail against death and let their grief and anger show. Death robs us of the physical presence and of all which that represents of the person who has died.

Jesus' response to his friend's death and to the grief of Mary and Martha was to raise Lazarus from the dead. It is an astounding demonstration of the power of God, proof for all to see that God has power over death. But in this instance, the resurrection of Lazarus is temporary. It stands in contrast to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, who now sits in glory at God's right hand for all time. Martha, earlier on in the chapter as Jesus arrived in the village responded to Jesus' assertion that Lazarus would rise again by this statement of faith "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the

last day.” Though Martha believed in the resurrection of the dead before Jesus went to the cross, Jesus’ own death and resurrection makes the possession of eternal life a fact of our present existence. Belief in Him means that we share His victory over death, and by committing our lives to him we begin to live that eternal life in the here and now. That is the hope and the promise that Jesus’ death brings to those who follow him. When ‘Jesus wept’ he may have been grieving his own earthly death which was soon to come. We need to remember that it is only through his death, it is only through his own sharing of the common fate of humanity, that the world, that we can be saved.

Right - confession time! Who backs away from reading the Book of Revelation? I certainly have avoided it wherever possible. It is **so** difficult to understand. The imagery and style of writing is something which we are not that accustomed to. Yet I imagine the younger generation with their great fondness for fantasy literature with its great imagery might get on slightly better with it! Yet within it there are little pots of gold such as today’s reading. It is full of such hope and comfort and the promise of a world and a life vastly superior to this. It is an expression of the hope that we have in Jesus Christ.

When we think of heaven, we often mistakenly think of it as ‘up there’. I think we all have to unlearn what we have understood as heaven. We have accepted the simplified truth that we have told our children, and

possibly ourselves that we will 'go to heaven'. This passage in Revelation, what was revealed to the apostle John is we won't be going from here to there. God's plan is to make 'all things new'. A new heaven and a new earth which will be forever joined together. John's Gospel starts with the explanation that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He did that for a short period of time, but when heaven and earth are joined for ever his dwelling will be permanently among us.

Eternal life is not a transition from one state of being to another but a complete renewal of the whole of creation, of heaven and of earth. The revelation to John is that God himself will live amongst us in his renewed creation, and when that happens there will be no more death, sorrow or pain – characteristics of the world we currently live in. God himself will wipe the tears from our eyes as he brings about the creation he had always planned. What a vision!

In chapters 5, 7 and 19 we read of an uncountable number of people (the saints) standing around God's throne in heaven singing glad songs and shouting their praises and is a foretaste of how things will be here when all things are made new. When heaven and earth are joined together and the darkness of the current world is gone for ever.

These passages teach us that God has dominion over everything, including death. One day, in his time heaven and earth as they are now will be transformed into an entirely new creation, a place where all the saints will live and where God himself will live among us. I'll finish with a couple of verses from the end of the Old Testament reading for today (Isaiah 25: 7-9) "On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; <sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. <sup>9</sup> In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.'" "