

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
All Saints Sunday, year 'B'
31 October 2021
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All Saints is a glorious and beautiful feast, but before we talk about its glory and beauty, a reality check is in order: and that is to admit that even we Christians find the idea of death uncomfortable—if not downright frightening. We shouldn't, of course, but we do.

I wonder if this is because lurking in the back of our minds is the primitive notion which thinks of faith as a kind of guarantee, that being a Christian means that there should be no trials and tribulations, no unhappiness—even no death. Jesus' friend Mary certainly seems to have thought so. "Lord, if you had been here," she says to Jesus in this morning's gospel, "my brother would not have died." In other words, what's the point of being a friend of the Son of God if he won't stop these things from happening?

And the thing is, Jesus raises Lazarus. Mary gets him back. The terrible thing is reversed. So maybe being a friend of the Son of God *does* come with benefits. Except, when you think about it, Lazarus didn't go on living for ever. His second death was probably even more wrenching and cruel than the first.

You see, the point of the story isn't that Lazarus came back from the dead. I don't even know if it really happened; the Fourth Gospel contains as much metaphor and symbolism as it does fact. But the inclusion of metaphor and symbolism doesn't mean the Gospel isn't *true*. In fact, it's deeply true, and the truth it points to is that death has no power over Jesus.

Even so, it *does* have power over us—and not just physical power. I'm thinking of the power I mentioned a minute ago: the power over our psyches and emotions, the power to frighten, to control, to paralyze, which, when you think about it, is far worse than the power over our physical existence, since it makes our spiritual existence a living hell.

This power of death brings us to today and to this great festival of All Saints. Today we are given an opportunity to admit that we are, in fact, in thrall to the frightening spectre of death. But we're also—and more importantly—given a chance to learn anew that the only way to escape the grasp of this dread terror is to look to Him for whom it held no terror, and to remember those whose terror has, in him, been turned to joy.

Notice that it's called "All Saints" not, "Famous Saints" or "The 1% Saints" or "The Best-Behaved Saints" but *All Saints*. In other words, today is for, and about, you and

me and all those we love—especially those whom we see no longer. What’s more, it’s about a God who loves the world so much that he refuses to let death have the last word.

And it’s also about how, in daring to confront the stark reality of death, we learn that rather than being an unwelcome tearing of the fabric of life, is actually woven into that fabric: an appropriate, necessary—and therefore, natural—part. Alas, our gospel only contains *part* of the story of the raising of Lazarus. A few verses before where we began this morning, Mary’s sister Martha says exactly the same thing to Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” But Jesus doesn’t respond with, “You’re right. If only I hadn’t dawdled on the way.” No: he simply says: “Your brother will rise again.”

Some versions of the Christian faith propose that only those who are pure enough, righteous enough, or good enough will inherit the Kingdom. They are false insofar as they insist that it’s personal perfection which is important when it comes to matters of eternity or that there are strings attached to the gift of new life in Christ. In a few minutes, when we consecrate the bread and wine, you’ll hear these words: “When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you.”

My dear friends, *that* is the truth which is at the core of this day. The promise that we will rise again—out of this vale of tears, above these present limitations, despite those ever-present fears—is not an empty one, though it may be incredible. It’s incredible that we will rise again, not because we were perfect or good or righteous but simply—amazingly—because we were loved. You can’t, as they say, make this stuff up.

But we can understand it in the contemplation of the meaning of our own mortality, by which we are given not only the grace to understand that the citizens of the Kingdom are not expected to conform to some pious stereotype, but also the courage to understand that what falls also rises. In the next chapter of the Fourth Gospel Jesus says, “For unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Death is a fact of life. There is no “if only” about it. But I have a radical suggestion for us: instead of thinking of our mortality in terms of a fearful “death sentence,” let’s think of it as a promised “life sentence”—an eternal life sentence. For even though it looks as if the kingdom of death reigns on all sides, there is another kingdom which is the kingdom of life. Our beloved dead are its citizens. We are its messengers. And all of us are its saints. For, “See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.”