

Sunday 4th November 2018
All Saints Sunday (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Wisdom 3.1-9

NT: Revelation 21.1-6a

G: John 11.32-44

The Gospel reading we have today is deeply challenging and shocking for a Sunday celebration of All Saints. The story begins with a criticism or you might say a protest against Jesus, by some of his closest companions. Mary accuses Jesus saying: 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died'. Like all of us, when facing a disaster or loss, the first question that springs to mind is the question of Mary: 'Where were you, Lord'. But, even if God does intervene, we are still faced with the criticism of the bystanders who said, 'He opened the eyes of the blind, couldn't he have stopped this man from dying?' Can't you do just another miracle? So, what we have here is Jesus facing his accusers already, and in this case, not the authorities, but those who have been close to him too. We might claim to be close to Jesus, but this does not mean that we are incapable of putting Jesus to trial. It's a recurrent theme in John's Gospel, until the moment when Jesus faces Pilate and Pilate asks him, 'What is truth?' But, here in chapter 11, the focus is on the personal feeling of grieving human hearts. 'Where were you, Lord?'

And God does not silence our protest. Jesus doesn't react against Mary negatively, as if saying, 'stop complaining, why are you so stupid, asking such stupid questions?' He does not say that. Instead, he says, 'Take me to where the body is'. 'I want to be where the hurt is most felt'. And Mary responds, 'Come and see'. Here Mary turns to be an example to us when we are complaining about great crises. Like Mary, after

we make our complaints, we should be able to say to God, 'Come and see'. God does not tell us to shut up, but he invites us to invite him to see.

Then, 'Jesus wept'. First, Jesus doesn't say, 'You stupid woman, stop complaining'; now, he even doesn't explain 'why' this entire tragedy. He doesn't say, 'let's gather together and talk about how the universe works, so that it can all become perfectly clear why Lazarus died'. If you meet friends in a time of bereavement, and you say to them let's talk about why all of this has happened, I doubt they will thank you for it. Jesus doesn't explain; he weeps. He absorbs the pain. What touches us, touches him, he is there where the hurt is felt most. We invite him to be where it hurts, because we know in light of his Resurrection that he has revealed what we heard in the book of Revelation today: 'The home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them'. He carries their grief.

And then, there is Martha, the bossier sister who is determined to say something. 'Take away the stone', says Jesus at the grave. And Martha responds: 'You must be joking'. 'This is a hot climate, in case you have not noticed. The smell is deadly'. Again, Jesus does not ask her to be quiet. He says, 'Did I not tell you if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' In other words, 'trust'. New testament scholars often are at pains to remind us that when we read 'believe' in the New Testament, we should translate it as 'trust'. This is not about 'ideas'; it's about action. Trust Jesus and you will see glory. So, here is a lesson for us this morning: as the Body of Christ, when we face protest, we don't silence it, we let it come. Then, we say 'take us to where the hurt is felt most', trust and we will see'. We are called to be a sign of promise in the name of the risen Christ.

Being a sign of promise in the name of Christ is where holiness, saintliness is to be found. It's not about being perfect. There are those who would think of the necessity of moral probity that assures us of saintly award and membership in the body of Jesus. That's not the Jesus we encounter in the Gospel of today. That's not reflective of the reaction of Mary and Martha. The Church is, no doubt, ordinarily sinful now. It does not need to represent itself as having been perfect before, anymore than the close companions of Jesus in our gospel today were.

Of course, the Church is often tempted to show triumph, perfection and success. When in the fourth century the Church began to be tangled with the politics of the Roman Empire after Constantine's conversion, you had the desert Fathers and Mothers returning to a simplicity of being contemporary with Jesus in the Eucharist, which changed the face of Christianity for ever. That is where we find our saints.

There is a paragraph that appears in the work of John Wilkinson, Dean of St. George's College in Jerusalem in the 1970s, who writes about a reputation of holiness in monastic traditions gained by the monks and nuns in Palestine after Constantine's conversion. John Wilkinson writes:

The desert of Judea to the east of Jerusalem became a school of monks whose nationalities were Latins, Persians, Indians, Ethiopians and Armenians. Since they were out in the desert the monks sometimes had great influence over Bedouin tribes, and St. Euthymius, one of the greatest Armenian monks, converted Peter Aspebet, an Arab exiled from Persia, and had him made bishop of his tribe

Now, guess what the diocese was called: 'The Camp' – my kind of diocese. And, indeed, we point to the camp of Jesus, if you like, at this Eucharist; that is not just because of the costumes that we like to wear. Neither is it because we are all righteous. We are, rather, all sinners, who have come, like the desert fathers and mothers, to acknowledge our need of grace in Jesus Christ at this Eucharist. We are not here because we are perfect. And it is worthwhile reminding the puritans – supposing any to have penetrated our usually secure defenses – that if there is to be any true association between holiness and sinners, as in the Christian tradition there very properly is, then not only the worship, but also, our various sumptuous feasts and dinners, the food, drink, the dress and the costumes, for which we are rather good in this parish, need to be worthy of a feast too.

There does occur always a momentary misgiving, conceivably of a puritanical sort, when we read about the righteous in the Bible, often with names of biblical heroes, who were, as we are told, 'commended by their faith'. But, the list should also call to mind another famous list of names found at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, which tells the ancestry of Jesus Christ. Matthew's genealogy could be a consolation to us on this feast, for I presume that those who are here this morning could hardly have worse fortune on the score of ancestors, than Jesus did. Matthew counted few worthies, but otherwise a collection of what could be considered rapists, adulterers, murderers and traitors. You do not have to have a good lineage after all to turn out saintly at the end.

Our celebration is of course a ritual and formal affair of thanksgiving to the saints, but formal and ritual as it may be, there is no reason, why it should lack honesty.

There is indeed a danger of religious celebration, which is at once exaggerated in piety but yet empty-headed as if we need the reassurance of a past, which exceeds morally any reasonable standard we would aspire to today.

Instead, with all our confusions, pains and various challenges that we or our neighbours face, we are called in the name of Christ to go where it hurts most, allow questions, even accusations, bring promise and trust glory to be revealed in the midst of all the pain because of Jesus. Instead of embarking on self-justification, and avoiding questions, we let others speak and hope for transformation.

So, as we contemplate Saints today, let us look out for those who are in need of the promise of glory. Let us remember the Church in Egypt, yet again this week facing the challenge of terrorism, death and suffering. They help us see where glory is. We give thanks for all those who have helped us see glory and live joyfully even in the midst of our various challenges. We are surrounded by them, living and departed as we celebrate this feast of new life, affirming the transformation that Jesus brings, taking his life as food and drink, we reach out to others, who hunger and thirst for this food and this drink. For that New Jerusalem, never exhausted, eternally present with the gift of Christ, we give thanks.

Fr Yazid Said