

**Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021**  
**All Saints' Sunday (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Wisdom 3.1-9**  
**NT: Revelation 21.1-6a**  
**G: John 11.32-44**

Each of us has something a little curious in our backgrounds, or in those of our families. For instance, I don't suppose I have mentioned to many of you before that my paternal grandfather was killed in 1951 when a church bell fell on top of him. Looking for something quirky in my own life, I was baptized in a rugby trophy, which is ironic given my own life-long aversion to participation in sport. And each of you could probably produce something in your past which stands out, is notable, or just peculiar.

Looking at our own lives and those of our ancestors seems to be all the rage these days. I have some knowledge of my own family tree as it branches out in various directions, and know that my nineteenth century forebears range from mill owners and publicans to a great great grandmother who had five illegitimate children, and not all by the same father. This, you must admit, was probably not quite the done thing in the 1820s and 1830s. And if you turn on your televisions on Tuesday evenings at the moment then you can even see celebrities trying to discover who they think they are, indulging in the pursuit of attempting to identify individuals in their own family histories who bear some resemblance to themselves in character and temperament. I wonder who Joe Lycett will produce from the past in a couple of days' time. We can all see ways in which our own parents have influenced us, but the current recreation appears to be to try and identify how our more distant ancestors with whom we have a relationship of neither time nor place have influenced us.

The feast of All Saints is a time when we do this same thing in the family of the Church. And

it is no coincidence that the feast of All Souls falls at the same time (we shall keep it next Sunday evening) because it is a time when we remember all those who have gone before us. It is a time when we try and give some meaning to the phrase we use every week in the Creed when we affirm our belief in “the Communion of Saints.”

So what is our relationship with the saints and martyrs who have gone before us? One of the most obvious answers is to say that they are examples to us: people who have lived the Christian faith before we have, and whose determination and resolution in following the way of Christ shines before us as a worthy path to follow. And yet somehow this description only seems to capture half of the significance of the communion of saints. Saints are not just friends whom we happen to admire, but they are members of our family – people who are bound to us by a form of kinship.

And in this sense we must also talk about not just those people who – at some stage or other – have been canonized by the Church, but also all those people who have gone before us and who have gone before us to that heavenly kingdom which we trust and believe to be eternal life. And so in celebrating our communion with all the saints today, we must also celebrate our communion with all souls.

But what is our family link to those who have gone before us? It is twofold: it is through our common humanity and it is through the church. The humanity we share is not just an accident of our species, rather it is our creation by God and the special privileges of freedom which he has given us which marks us out from other species. Because we, along with all the saints and martyrs, are part of that creation, we have not only a relationship with our Creator, but also with each other. By our living in the world we are subject to the

same forces in our lives, the same frustrations, the same temptations, and we share the same struggles in our relationship with God. The failings of humanity affect those we label as saints and martyrs, and also all of us, in the same way; our success in engaging with the world and yet also overcoming the world may be in relative degrees, but we experience the achievements in the same way, and also the disappointments.

And so the saints and the martyrs are not something distant from us; they do not represent the unachievable and the sublime, but rather they are our brothers and sisters, just as all the departed whom we shall commemorate next week are also our brothers and sisters in our human creation.

But there is something more: our affirmation of the Communion of Saints in the Creed draws our attention to the relationship we have with the saints through the Church. The Church – the body of Christ – has been present throughout the ages to bind together the faithful, even if the institutionalized church to which we belong demonstrates the same failings in our own age as all humans. Our membership of the Church is not just a club, an organization to which we pay a membership fee, but rather a fellowship by which, through the grace of baptism, we become part of the body of Christ, sharing in his divinity as he shared in our humanity. Those venerated by the Church as saints and martyrs were and are members of the same Church to which we belong, and by our participation in the life of the Church, so we participate in the lives of the saints.

Those themes are brought together in our Gospel reading today when John uses the story of the resurrection of Lazarus to foreshadow the resurrection of Christ. We get in this moment not just the shared humanity of Christ and creation, but also the participation in

Christ's sacrifice. In the usually slightly wooden narrative of John's Gospel where the narrative is a construct to create a theological argument, we get a glimpse of reality with a hint of an emotional reaction from Jesus to the death of his friend. Jesus wept. But the participation in death and resurrection which we see in Lazarus is also something in which we share through our faith and our church membership. The phrase "Communion of Saints" means, above all, those who are part of the Cross event.

And as we approach the Eucharist today, we share in the same sacrifice as the saints throughout the ages, for as the Eucharist makes present the body and blood of Christ every time it is celebrated, so at every celebration we share in that one perfect sacrifice of Christ. Through the Eucharist Christ is present to us as he was present to the saints and martyrs, and as we proclaim that "though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread" so we are also one body with those who have gone before us, those whom we venerate as saints, and those whom we shall commemorate next week at the All Souls' Eucharist.

All the saints therefore have a closer relationship with us than just being a series of commemorations which we make on certain dates throughout the year, or grouped together today as we celebrate the feast of All Saints. And it is because of what we share together that, like our family ancestors, we can look at how they make us into who we are today. It is not just how we worship and celebrate God in our lives that we have learned from the saints, but the very body of Christ, of which we are members, is enriched by their mutual membership. The richness of our faith and of our church is built upon those who have gone before us, and we cannot fail to be influenced by that.

So, just as you can look at your parents, your grandparents, your brothers and sisters, and see how they have formed you as you are today, and just as you know that your ancestors have all contributed as well to make you who you are, so also the saints have made us who we are. In the family of the Church the saints have played their part in what has gone before, so that by example and by kinship we, the people of God worshipping in a community of faith, are nourished by their presence amongst us. And so today let us give thanks for the communion of saints, rejoicing in our common heritage with them, and our relationship with them and with each other, fellow members of the body of Christ.

Fr Crispin Pailing