

**Church of the Holy Spirit, Plymouth**  
**All Saints' Sunday    1 November 2015**

Today is All Saints Day; it is the Sunday in the Church Year on which we celebrate that we are ALL saints, each and every one of us. But before we can celebrate that, we need first to address today's gospel: the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus.

The philosopher who authored the Book of Ecclesiastes wrote *"For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die."*

Each and every one of us knows that. Our lives, yours and mine, are finite and will come to an end. And each of us, I imagine, hopes that when we breathe our last it will be after a full and purposeful life. But what of those deaths that occur out of season, the accidental death, or worse, the intentional taking of life? How does one deal with such difficult moments?

The death of Lazarus appears to be one of those unseasonable deaths. Lazarus and his two sisters were close friends of Jesus. Elsewhere in the gospel we have heard of Jesus dining in their home, when Martha, the practical one, gets upset with her sister, Mary, for sitting at Jesus' feet, not helping with the preparations.

Lazarus has died, and his death was not just a personal loss for his sisters but an economic one. He was, most likely, their only means of support, the protector of two unmarried sisters in a world that didn't value women apart from men. Adding to the anguish, they had summoned Jesus in hopes that this one whose prayers God answered would have prevented this death. But Jesus, it seems, does not show up until after the funeral, after all the friends have arrived with casseroles and condolences, some four days after the burial of Lazarus. And so both of the sisters' first words are filled with anguish, if not reprisal: *"If (only) you had been here, our brother would not have died."*

In the verses just before our reading today, Jesus has reassured Martha that her brother will experience the resurrection, life beyond this life with God. Not only that, he has declared himself to be the resurrection and the life of all. Yet while believing this, both sisters assume that Jesus was absent from their suffering. But God is not absent at those moments of death and at the time of our grieving. Our loving God, whom we understand most clearly in the person of Jesus, is always close, always caring and compassionate.

Often at untimely deaths we hear people ask, "Where is God?" The clearest answer is that God was there; God is there, calling us to put away the fear of death. Yes, grief is real. Jesus wept at the death of his friend, but Jesus also calls us to come out from the grave, to cast off the fear of death. To the dead man Lazarus, Jesus said *"Come out."* And he instructed the others to *"unbind him,"* to set him free. Our faith in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord bids us also to come out, to be unbound and set free from the power of death. Come out and dare to live your life now.

Our Christian faith doesn't tell us that we should not grieve, but our strong sense of God presence with us now and for ever enables us to look upon our own dying (and that of the people we love) without fear and not as an end, but as part of our journey with Christ through death into the life of God.

Bishop Hirschfeld, writing in the diocesan newsletter which I hope you received in the mail this week, reminds us that "Fear is not a Christian habit of mind." [Marilynne Robinson] And why is that so? "It's because if we place our heart in the trust that God has already beaten down death in the death and resurrection of Jesus, then we have really nothing to be afraid of."

*"Fear not"* is perhaps the most frequent statement by Jesus in all the gospels. Of course, there may be some moments when fear is quite appropriate, but what Jesus often refers to is our fear of scarcity, the anxiety that we all carry with us that there won't be enough. Fear and anxiety are realities for many people, but Jesus offers a different way. John's gospel states that Jesus *"came that you may have life and life abundantly."* That doesn't mean that things will always work out in the way that I might want it, but rather that God is in charge (not me) and that is a very good thing. Life will happen with good things and bad, but we can, I think, take Jesus at his word and believe and live his hope for us.

Today we began our service by singing one of my favorite hymns: *"For all the saints who from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed, Thy Name, O Jesus, be forever blessed. Alleluia."*

I cannot sing that song without thinking of the saints whom I have known *"who from their labors rest,"* people from my life whom I can number among that great cloud of witnesses. And I trust that you can do the same.

Think back for a moment. Who were or are the saints in your life experience who saw the good and holy in you? Who were or are those special ones who are windows of light or encouragement or hope or steadfast love for you? What did or do they do that allows that extra sense of goodness, of support, of comfort to your heart? On All Saints Sunday the Church upholds them one and all. For scripture is right; they are the lights to enlighten the nations. And, as the classic hymn puts it, *"The Saints of God are folk just like me, and I mean to be one too."*

I recall the story of the little girl in her church school class, whose teacher asked the question *"Who are saints?"* And the child, having only seen 'saints' as they were pictured in the colorful stained glass windows that ran around the side of the church building, replied, *"Saints are people who let the light shine through."*

I like that. Saints are people who let the light shine through.

The collect for *"All Saints"* asks for God's grace so that you and I might *"follow those blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living."*

The delightful hymn of my childhood, which the choir will sing at the offertory, begins, *"I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew."*

In one parish where I served, on All Saints Sunday the church school children would process to that him, carrying placards of the historical saints, but they could just as well have been carry pictures of our local saints, the individuals we have known.

That kind of inclusiveness, you see, is what All Saints Day is all about. For this is not just a feast day to celebrate the great names in church history.

Many of the illustrious figures of the faith have their own feast days on which to be recognized and saluted for their unique contributions. And, likewise, today is not a commemoration of the forgotten dead, whose lives, while not remembered, still attained to some level of perfection beyond rank and file Christians. No. As I've said frequently, All Saints Day is not *"a celebration of someone who is so sanctified that when she stubs her toe on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night, wakes the household to a descant from the Hallelujah Chorus."*

Sainthood, contrary to popular belief, is not about perfection. It is not about overly sanctimonious behavior. It is not about being the ultimate nice guy.

*"Saints,"* is the word St. Paul used to describe all the faithful when he began his letters to struggling churches of the first century. When addressing the saints of Corinth or Galatia, he isn't referring to those who are "holier-than-thou," but to regular folk, whose holiness comes not from within, but rather as a reflection of the Holy One who loves them.

Throughout the New Testament, the word '*saint*' refers to all believers, for we understand that all have been made holy by the gift of God's Spirit. As one person put it, "Sainthood is a bit of pure grace - given in baptism, and it has nothing to do with merit or deservedness. It's on the house." (H.K. Oehmig)

I once heard a story than anyone who has been to the movies should be able to identify with. It seems that a family had gone into a large movie theater, but on the way their youngest son, unknownst to the others, had stopped at the refreshment stand to buy some popcorn. The others, unaware of this, went ahead to find their seats. By the time the young boy got into the theater the lights were already dim, and he was unable to locate his family. He paced up and down the aisles searching the crowd in the near-darkness. As the lights began to go down even further, he stopped and asked out loud, "Does anybody recognize me?"

Each person in this church needs to be recognized. Each of us needs to recognize every single person as a vital member of this household of faith. And each of us needs to recognize oneself as a "saint."

I wish that we could dispense once and for all with the notion that saints equal the purest of the pure. For our "living into being a 'saint' is not about niceness, but newness. It is about becoming a person and a member of a community, whose purpose is to face in two directions: to face Christ in faith; and to face neighbor in love. It is about a people (who, not fearing death, are) willing to become infused with the life of God, a people with a willingness to lay down their lives for others in the name of Christ. It is about a people with a passion to make a difference in a world in need of their love and mercy."

It seems to me that that Jesus really only set down two basic characteristics of being Christians, two attitudes and actions upon which everything else is built.

- As Christians, as saints of God, you and I are called by our Lord to love God with all our being, with our minds, our hearts, even our financial support.
- And we are called to love every other person with the same level of charity, of forgiveness, of mercy, that we naturally extend to ourselves.

That's what saints do; that's what ordinary Christians find themselves capable of doing. They love God by loving the person next to you, whoever that may be. Or put in the words of the Baptismal Covenant, we "**seek and serve** Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self." Amen.