

Sermon 3 November 2024 All Saints (Raising of Lazarus)

Revelation 21:1-6 John 11:32-44

Last Friday was All Saints Day in our church calendar, and so we are celebrating that today. The saints are an inspiration to us. They encourage and inspire us in our service to God. At the same time, we can take comfort from the fact that they were not perfect, and in fact invariably very human. Take St Peter for example, the rock on which our church is founded. Three times he denied even knowing Jesus, let alone being one of his followers. Legend has it that one of St Francis of Assisi's followers heard him pray, 'Forgive me, Father, I am nothing but a worm.' That, of course, could well be interpreted as humility, which is a priceless value. As a man of the soil, I could also point out that worms actually make a significant contribution to the goodness of the soil, but I don't think Francis had that in mind when he uttered those words.

The lesson we can take from the saints is that, in the end, they relied fully on God for their direction and strength. Jesus said, *'God blesses those who are poor in spirit and realise their need for him, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.'* Matthew 5:3. In other words, we are being reminded, blessed are those who know their need for God, and also know their need for God's love, help, strength, guidance and forgiveness. The saints reflect this paradox of being poor in spirit and yet knowing the goodness of God and their reliance on God. It is something many of us could relate to.

I now want to turn to our gospel reading, which is actually the reading set down for All Saints Day, and which relates the story of the raising of Lazarus. This particular story is mentioned in only John's Gospel, which raises interesting points. If the gospel writers knew about this miracle, how could they possibly omit it? And if it actually happened, how could they fail to know about it?

In the other three gospels, there are accounts of people being raised from the dead. Matthew, Mark and Luke all include the account of the raising of Jairus's daughter. There is the story of the raising of the widow's son at Nain in Luke: *'A funeral procession was coming out as Jesus approached the village gate. The young man who had died was a widow's only son, and a large crowd was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. "Don't cry," he said. Then he walked over to the coffin and touched it. "Young man," he said, "I tell you, get up." Then the dead boy sat up and began to talk! And Jesus gave him back to his mother.'* Luke 7:12-15.

But in both these cases, the raising took place immediately after death. Burial had to take place very soon after death in the Palestine climate, and without wanting to spook you, there has been evidence that people on occasions were buried alive because of that haste. So it is quite possible that persons involved were actually in a coma, and it was perhaps a miracle of diagnosis on Jesus' behalf. But with Lazarus, it was a different story. For whatever reason, Lazarus had been dead for four days and smelt like it! *'But Martha, the dead man's sister, protested, "Lord, he has been dead for four days. The small will be terrible."'* So just what did happen? We don't really know but undoubtedly something tremendous did happen.

In the end, as is the case with so many stories in the Bible that we struggle to comprehend in a literal sense, we look for the message, we look for the teaching because therein lies the truth. There may be problems with this story, we may never know what exactly happened in Bethany so many years ago, but we do know that in Jesus we have resurrection and we have life. We do know that in Jesus we find new beginnings, we find fulfilment and meaning in our lives. That is what this story is all about, and I can't think of a better way of illustrating this than with another story.

A mysterious traveller once visited an old, run-down monastery. At one time, the monastery had thrived. Young men came from far and wide to join the monastery. At the time of the traveller's visit, however, all had changed. Only a handful of monks remained and they didn't get on very well together. The once spotless buildings had begun to fall into a state of disrepair, and the worship of the monks was uninspiring. The monks told the traveller the dismal story of their monastery. They begged the traveller to stay and help them rebuild their order. But he refused. 'I cannot help you to restore your order. All I can do is to tell you that one of you is a true apostle of Christ.' And with that, the mysterious traveller left.

The monks were amazed at the traveller's words, and each one began to secretly ponder the meaning. Could this really be, they thought? Could one of us actually be a true apostle of Christ? Could it be Brother Phillip? Or Brother Thaddeus? Or perhaps.....even me?

Little by little that old monastery began to change. The monks began to treat one another with respect, not knowing which one of them was the true apostle. In fact, each monk even began to treat himself differently, not knowing if he were the one. The monks began to repair the buildings, to make them suitable as a home of a true apostle of Christ. Their worship became charged with passion and praise, after all, they knew that a true apostle of Christ was worshipping amongst them.

As more time went by, people who passed by and visited the monastery noticed something they had not seen before. Although their number was small, the monks seemed to love and respect each other. Before too long, people began to visit to worship with the monks. Younger men began to arrive at the monastery, asking questions. Many chose to stay and join the order. Within a few years, the monastery was thriving once more and without realising it, each of the monks had himself become a true apostle of Christ.

There are two very important messages for us in this story. Firstly, it is all about attitude. The monks had the wrong attitude to each other and even to themselves. Winston Churchill said, *'Attitude is a small thing that makes a big difference.'* It is so very true. The monks' attitude was negative and so everything about them – their home, their calling, their own lives – was on a downward slope. I have never, ever seen success born out of a negative mindset.

The second message for us is a message of new beginnings. This is a story of the monks rediscovering fulfilment and meaning in their lives. This is a story of resurrection. And how did this come about? Purely and simply because the monks rediscovered the spirit of Christ in their midst.

We are inclined to think of resurrection as applying strictly to a rising from the dead, as in the case of Lazarus, or of course, Christ himself. But there are so many ways by which we can experience resurrection in our lives – in the healing of our bodies and of relationships, in a change of direction with career, in coming to terms with loss, and as was the case with the monks, having a revitalised sense of purpose in our lives. There is absolutely no doubt that a relationship with God and Christ can be the catalyst for that renewed sense of purpose. With God and Christ on our side, those new beginnings can be made possible and even enhanced.

I finish with that wonderful verse from Revelation, which we heard in our first reading: *'And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'*" Let us all come to that spring and partake of that life-changing water.