

Saints between Cross and Resurrection

All Saints Sunday, Year C—6 November 2022

Reverend Martin Johnson

Daniel 7.1-3; 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1.11-23; Luke 6.20-31

During the week we celebrated the feast of All Souls and I endeavoured to give an Anglican spin to that commemoration, as in turn to this one. I suspected that few of us gathered on that day were praying for our departed loved ones in their purgatorial journey! But I did suggest that our language—commending our loved ones to God’s *merciful* keeping—suggested there is indeed a need for mercy and that this was a call for mourning. At All Souls tide, then, we contemplated the tragedy of life, its incompleteness, the things left unsaid and undone, the contradictions, the unrealised hopes and dreams. It is the stuff of the cross; hence the muted colours and the solemn liturgy; I gave my black vestments an airing.

All Saints however is a celebration that reminds us that in some way, in God’s good purpose, we are made complete, that all contradiction is resolved, that our lives are hid in Christ and therefore perfected. It is all about the resurrection—hence the colour and the joyous hymns.

I wonder if any of you remember the movie ‘Shadowlands’ the biopic on the life of C.S. Lewis. The movie deals with his relationship with the American poet Joy Davidman, and her eventual death from cancer. It would be an event that challenged Lewis’s Christian faith. He later wrote how belief in ‘an afterlife’ failed to console him, and how he was unable to overcome the longing of being together with her here on earth. He wrote of his irritation with believers who say, ‘there is no death’, or claim that death ‘does not matter.’

There is among some a move to merge All Souls and All Saints, I notice the lectionary suggests white or violet for all Souls. They must be held together, yes, but they are different. All Souls is all about mourning, about the irreplaceable value of human life that is bound to death. All Saints offers us a glimpse of the joy of the kingdom. This is what Christian faith is about; this is our raw material, this what our gathering is all about, this is our vernacular, a language of eternity that offers a way of relating to our mortality—that does not deny the pain and horror of death, but speaks about it in the context of indescribable joy. That is why, on this day, we gather at the feet of our Lord and once again hear the Beatitudes. *Blessed* are the poor, the hungry, those who mourn, those who are reviled. It is this teaching that contains the message of both All Souls and All Saints.

In our modern world, for most, Church is viewed as an option in their lives. Often the differing views of Christians represent a maze they’d rather not enter and there are many others reasons, too innumerable for us to consider this morning. But I wonder if part of the issue is that we seem not to have adequately managed to proclaim life and death and find a language that speaks profoundly about the inestimable value of human life in *all its conditions*, alongside the hope we hold in something beyond it. If you examine many differing Christian traditions, you will find an emphasis on one or the other. It is the All Souls/All Saints dichotomy, Cross *versus* Resurrection, death *versus* life. The fact is, we can’t have one without the other.

To be blessed, to be a Saint, is to be able to live in this place between the two. Daniel this morning found it a terrifying place, and in many differing ways it is, but it is the place where Christ is. For many, the Saints are, and I quote, ‘dead Roman Catholics’ but in reality these blessed folk are very, very, much alive, though largely unrecognised. And if we do notice them, we don’t necessarily see the things we expect to see. We don’t see what many believe are religious ‘qualities.’ If Jesus were to walk among us today, he would initially be

unrecognisable: he may be a small child, he may come from the wrong side of the tracks, he may be homeless or hungry—there’s precedent for all this, remember!

Etty Hillesum was a Holocaust victim. In her diary she wrote:

You cannot help us, ... we must help You help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days, and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. . . . There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?¹

Hillesum understands her purpose is to ‘take responsibility for God.’ This gives us an important clue into what makes a saint, responsibility is—in one sense—the founding virtue of saintliness. When we do that, we find God in all sorts of places, and what happens is an intense, radical engagement with the eternal; read resurrection, which feeds into an equally strong and radical involvement with the temporal world and the people living—and suffering; in it, read cross. It is an intense engagement with, and a valuing of, human life, alongside a sense of something more, something greater. This should be our narrative, proclaimed and lived. It is a potent sign that the Church is indeed not just one option but is the way.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread. In the context of great fear and trepidation, Jesus engaged in a deeply religious celebration and changed it forever. He took the ancient rite of passage from slavery to freedom, death to life and embodied it in himself. They became one; this is what the Eucharist is all about. We do it because he asked to recall his death and his resurrection. In doing so we are taking responsibility for God, we are becoming his Body with all that it bears. Our vocation is to be one with the Saints, to ‘give shelter’ to a vulnerable divine presence, live and proclaim a narrative that seeks to embody God, to take responsibility for the appearing of God and of suffering and love. This celebration of All Saints and that of All Souls lie at the very heart of our Christian tradition. They are all about God and about God in cross and resurrection, and how we might proclaim and live it . . . long may they be so. Amen.

¹ Hillesum, Etty. *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–1943*. Edited by Klaas A. D. Smelik and Arnold J. Pomerans. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, pp. 488, 506.