

All Saints and the Raising of Lazarus (John 11:32-44)

by Rev John White

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is All Saints Sunday, so before we look at John's gospel I want to say a few words about saints.

There has been an All Saints Day from at least the beginning of the third century, and probably before that, from almost the beginning of the Christian church. The Western Church settled on the present date of 1st November in the 9th century, but what is a saint?

The notion of the Christian saint or 'holy person' can be traced back to St Paul who spoke of the holiness of the church, or body of Christ.

In Romans chapter 1 verse 7 St Paul wrote, "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" In this case St Paul is writing to all the Christians in Rome.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 2 St Paul writes, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

Again, St Paul is writing to all Christians who are saints in Corinth, and in this case to everyone else as well who are

sanctified in Christ Jesus, 'sanctified' means 'made holy.' We are God's beloved, who are called to be saints.

As saints, we are linked to each other by our faith in Christ. The New Testament speaks of Christians as brothers and sisters, so we are one family in Christ, linked to God's people of the past and to those of the future.

In Ephesians chapter 2 verse 19 St Paul wrote, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

That doesn't mean that we are made perfect, but it does mean that Christ has made us holy, that is, set apart to a Godly purpose, he has called us to live holy lives.

So, while it is us who through our faith and trust in Christ are saints, nevertheless some people are even so saintly that the church recognises them as such and calls them saints.

We should remember with joy and thanksgiving the generations before us that answered Christ's call and received his grace to become his saints through their faith in his saving power.

When we are afraid, or just anxious about the future, we can ponder on the fact that there is no trial or tribulation that we can face in our own generation that many Christians before us have not faced and conquered gloriously in their generation.

I now want to look at the story of Lazarus in John's gospel. The story of Lazarus starts at the beginning of chapter 11.

Now Mary and Martha were Lazarus's two sisters, and it was Mary who anointed Jesus with perfume and who wiped his feet with her hair, and all three were close friends of Jesus.

When Lazarus got sick, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, hoping that he would come quickly and heal him.

But when Jesus heard of his illness he purposely delayed, so that Lazarus would die before he could get to Bethany. Jesus then explained to his disciples, in verse 4 just before our reading "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Jesus did not plan Lazarus' death, but he did know that Lazarus' illness would lead to death, and he chose to let nature take its course in order to teach his disciples that it is he and only he who can give us life after death.

We now pick up the story from verse 32 where we are told that Jesus and Mary met somewhere on the road and that when she saw him she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

In verse 33 we are told that Mary and the Jews who were with her were weeping. In the Middle East weeping was not a quiet affair; rather the more noise you made the deeper

was seen to be your grief, no wonder Jesus was ‘greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.’

And now Jesus spoke for the first time after meeting Mary and he said to her, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “‘Lord, come and see’.” ‘They’ of course were Mary and the Jews who had gone with her when she left home to go and meet Jesus.

Then Jesus began to weep, that is, tears came to his eyes in his grief, and the Jews said to each other, “See how he loved him.”

We then come to verse 37 which reads, “But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’”

The answer to that is of course he certainly could have done, but we know from verse 4, just before our reading that Jesus didn’t want to, because he had a far greater lesson to demonstrate to his disciples about life after death, but Mary and her friends are yet unaware of that.

We now come to the scene at the tomb which, like so many tombs at that time, were either natural caves, or were manmade caves cut into the sandstone and the entrance blocked off.

On arrival at the tomb, we are told that Jesus was again greatly disturbed, this is clearly different to weeping so what did St John mean by ‘greatly disturbed’?

It is generally believed to mean that Jesus was angry, but why should he be angry, and with whom was he angry?

It could have been his own moments of fear about his own death that he was angry about. We know that he was afraid before he was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane as reported in Matthew's gospel chapter 26 verse 39 where we have these words:

“And going a little further, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’”

Jesus was divine, but he was also human and as such the death of his friend Lazarus' may have reminded him of his own imminent death and that he was angry at his own fears that momentarily passed across his mind.

The Gospels have little to say about Jesus' own emotions until now, but here in this passage we are told that he loves Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, and that he is disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, and that he wept for Mary and Martha in their grief.

Emotions are not neat and tidy; as I've indicated before, Mary's weeping would not be gentle and controlled as was Jesus' weeping but would instead be loud and shrieking in torment for her brother.

The natural human response when faced with such terrible grief is a welling up of emotions, of grief, fear, anger, and

frustration. Mary's grief clearly strikes a chord in something deep and vulnerable in Jesus.

When Jesus arrives at the tomb, very much like the tomb in which he himself will shortly be placed, he doesn't do any of the things that mourners usually do at the graveside of a loved one; he says in verse 39, "Take away the stone."

The modern equivalent would be to tell the family of the deceased to get shovels and dig up the grave. We need to regain our sense of surprise at Jesus' command, our sense of shock, even outrage at the very suggestion.

This is not something that a sensitive person would do in the presence of the family of the deceased at a grave side. It sounds like desecration of the grave which would cause horror to those who were mourning their family member.

It is Martha who protests at Jesus' command to take away the stone because Lazarus' body will have begun serious decomposition after four days in the heat of the Middle East.

The terrible smell and visual evidence of decomposition would be an additional and unnecessary horror. She and Mary have suffered enough, and now Jesus is trying to make it even worse!

Martha like Mary believed that Jesus could have saved their brother's life when he was ill as Mary repeated Martha's words when she told Jesus at the beginning of our reading, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

But now Martha is reluctant to obey Jesus because she cannot believe that taking away the stone will be a sensible thing to do because of the smell, in effect she has lost her faith that Jesus can now do anything to save her brother.

And to try and reassure her Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” Now Martha’s faith has been restored and without further hesitation she told them to take away the stone.

“And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me.’” Jesus said this to demonstrate to the crowd that God was with him, and when he had said those words, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus come out.”

Then Lazarus came out still bound in strips of cloth and Jesus said “Unbind him and let him go”.

It is easy to think that Jesus performed this miracle because of his love for Lazarus and his family, but we now know that was not the case.

Jesus gave us his reason for raising Lazarus in verse 4 when he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

Jesus has used the natural death of Lazarus to teach his disciples that it is he, Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life to those who believe and trust in him.

Jesus said these words to Martha (as recorded in verse 25 and 26 just before our reading), “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

And then just after our reading, Jesus asked her, “Do you believe this?” She answered. “Yes, Lord, I believe,” and now I ask you. “Do you believe?”

And you may answer the Lord for yourselves, “Yes, Lord, I believe.”

Amen.