

## All Saints' Day – Brian Hartley

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

*Curse God and die*, Job's wife yells at him. And even though John Donne says, in one of his famous sermons, "It is a rebellious thing not to be content to die," none of us seems all that comfortable with the subject. There are a few exceptions, however—such as Thomas Lynch. He reflects, rather matter-of-factly, though some might claim rather morosely, on his own funeral wishes: "I want a mess made in the snow so that the earth looks wounded, forced open, an unwilling participant. Forego the tent. Stand openly to the weather. Get the larger equipment out of sight. It's a distraction...see it till the very end. . . Go to the hole in the ground. Stand over it. Look into it. Wonder. And be cold. But stay until it's over. Until it is done. After the words are finished, lower it. Leave the ropes. Toss the gray gloves in on top. Push the dirt in and be done" (*The Undertaking*, 197).

Why do we find such cold words, such a harsh reality, abhorrent? Why do doctors avoid speaking of death and why do we conspire with them in its denial? I would like to suggest this morning that, beyond our fear of the unknown, and the larger process that accompanies our dying, lies something even more frightening: the thought that we will be forgotten—that life will somehow go on without our name spoken or our exploits recounted—in short, that our story will not be told, that our presence on the earthly stage will be forever wiped clean from the slate of recorded memory that makes up human history.

Now I must confess that I have given more thought to this of late than ever before, thanks to the ill health of my parents, frequent autumnal walks through Montrose Cemetery, and the recognition, as I look around, that I am now one of the "old guys." Reading David Brooks this past month and thinking about "eulogy" virtues over against "resume" virtues has had the rather sobering effect at this stage of life of causing me to ask, "What am I leaving behind? What will I be remembered for?"

This, then, on something of a more communal scale, is what today is all about. All Saints' Day is that one day in the calendar when we blast a hole in time and space and think about the church in cosmic and eternal terms. All Saints' Day provides us with an opportunity to stroll through our cemeteries of communal memory and to retell the stories that have formed us as the people of God. All Saints' Day stands as a stark reminder that our lives are short and, as the old gospel tune proclaims, "Only what's done for Christ will last." Today's texts, then, are an invitation to this journey of memory that begins in the **holy** city and ends in the **heavenly** city, and all of them remind us that **our destiny begins and ends with God and the company of saints.**

In the text provided us from Isaiah, we find ourselves surrounded by a rich and sumptuous feast taking place on Mount Zion, the site of God's royal rule. The sharing of heady and strong wine alongside the quality and quantity of food suggests deep friendship, at an intensely intimate level, between God and his subjects. If I may be so bold, it points us in the direction of the consummate Eucharist, the shadow of which we experience as we approach this Table. For the writer of this text, the mythological universe of the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians would have been the dominant cultural motif surrounding the community. In this ancient literature,

Death was oftentimes pictured in a personified form, swallowing up everything before him. It is no accident, then, that this writer uses the same Semitic language and analogy, but reverses it in a most powerful way so that the Hebrew God is seen to be swallowing up death, itself! Whether the shroud and sheet referred to here refers to the death pall, mourner's garb, or even the temple curtains themselves, the image of destroying that which alienates us from God symbolizes an ultimate victory beyond the grave itself.

It is exactly that image which confronts us in the powerful narrative from John's gospel, where Isaiah's language, as it were, takes on the clothing of the dead Lazarus. This account in John 11 parallels the funerary customs which we later encounter regarding Jesus in each of the gospels. For instance, both Lazarus and Jesus, we are told, were buried wrapped in linen strips, with their faces covered with a cloth. This is an earlier version of what my friend, David Cressy, has documented in his book, Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England (Oxford, 1997). In his discussion of the order for the burial of the dead, he provides a popular artist's rendering from an early 17<sup>th</sup>-century book on the Ars Moriendi (or, "art of dying"), in which a corpse is pictured covered in a shroud with a cloth over the victim's face. Surrounding the art work is the phrase, "A shroud to grave, men only have" (397).

The point that all of these texts are making is that the body was usually covered up with some sort of cloth to protect it from exposure to the elements or the potential ravages of animals. In the case of the first-century stories of Jesus and of Lazarus, the other concern was to house the bones, which would typically have been collected a year or so after the person's death and taken to the ossuary for later storage. Had the person come back to life by virtue of some sort of miracle, these coverings which were meant for protection would suddenly have become encumbrances to the person given new life. So, unlike the resurrected Jesus, whom we are told left the funerary wrappings behind, because he would never encounter death again, Lazarus is pictured as literally being "bound up" with these physical symbols of death. All of this leads to the dramatic conclusion of today's gospel lesson, with the memorable line, *Unbind him and let him go* (John 11:44).

This juxtaposition between the Old Testament and gospel passage for today is perhaps continued through yet another important connection—the reference to crying. Most of us who have spent time with English translations of the Bible know that this Johannine narrative contains the shortest verse in the Bible: *Jesus wept*. And from a young age I can remember hearing countless sermons on this passage about how this reveals our Lord's compassion for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—particularly in light of the surrounding narrative, which seems to suggest that Jesus intentionally waited until after his friend's death to approach Bethany. Even though we, the readers, have been clued in that this is for the greater glory of God, it still creates a rather callous portrait of Jesus, which can only be offset for many of us by virtue of the fact that he now is seen to engage in that most human and vulnerable of acts—crying.

Now I hate to cry. Like most men of my era, I grew up believing that crying was only for girls and for sissies. We were encouraged to encounter the worst that life could throw at us "like men" and never to cry. Then God gave me this woman, whom I love, who can cry with the best of them. And if that weren't enough, he provided me with daughters who would sit on either

side of me in the theatre, their arms intertwined with mine, tears running down their faces. They wouldn't watch "Old Yeller" with me for this reason and my younger daughter even bristles if you dare to mention "ET: the Extraterrestrial." Further, I have decided that age plays tricks on us and makes older men more prone to cry. I have no idea if this is scientifically true or not, but I have watched it happen with my father and am now experiencing it myself. I don't know that I have any more empathy, but I do know that I tend to be much more vulnerable than in the old testosterone-driven days of my youth; sometimes it happens and I just go all *verklemt*.

And so here is Jesus—one of us—shown **crying** by the Evangelist. But remember, the prophet had said not only that death would be swallowed up, but that God would *wipe away the tears from all faces*. And so it is that in this very story Jesus, the God-man, the divine Logos, cries out, *Lazarus, come forth!* And in that moment, the one seen as most human through his tears, is also boldly revealed as the Divine one who will wipe away all tears. Since this is John's gospel, this event is called by the Evangelist the last of seven *semeia*, or signs—which point beyond their literal quality to something even greater.

And it is here that the narrative bends, and we find ourselves caught up in the language of the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. As the mystic Austin Farrer suggested, this book is "the one great poem which the first Christian age produced," (Reversed Thunder, 5). Most of our misreading of this text flows, in fact, from our refusal or inability to deal with the author as a poet, rather than a predictor. As Eugene Peterson tells us, "Poetry is not the language of objective explanation but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it. We do not have more information after we read a poem, we have more experience" (5).

While both today's Old Testament and Psalter readings are strictly centered in the Jerusalem of earthly kings, this passage takes us into the first segment of a lengthy vision of the New Jerusalem. What we have before us is Jerusalem transformed. Gone are the images of primeval waters with their attendant malevolent mythical creatures, and before us descending from the heavens comes the holy city arrayed *as a bride adorned for her husband* (21:2). This vision of purity receives reinforcement with a repetition of the prophetic words we heard from Isaiah: *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away* (21:4). Peterson's description may be helpful to us here: "There is not so much as a hint of escapism in St. John's heaven. This is not a long (eternal) weekend away from the responsibilities of employment and citizenship, but the intensification and healing of them. Heaven is formed out of dirty streets and murderous alleys, adulterous bedrooms and corrupt courts, hypocritical synagogues and commercialized churches, thieving tax-collectors and traitorous disciples: a city, but not a holy city," (Reversed Thunder, 174).

Our journey this morning, then, to borrow Peterson's phrase, takes us on a pilgrimage of healing. This is a journey, not to a heaven distant from an earth subjected to destruction, but to an earth made new from the heavens above. Heaven is not some fantasy, these texts suggest, "simply a dream to retreat to when things get messy and inhospitable on earth. Heaven is not fantasy. We have access to heaven now: it is the invisibility in which we are immersed, and that is developing into visibility, and that one day will be thoroughly visible" (Peterson, 172). Jesus'

words to Lazarus in today's gospel lesson are not just for his friend, they are for us, as well—"Come forth from the grave!"

This morning we gather to remember, and our remembrance of things past, of those who have gone before, leads us not to despair, but to hope. And I remind you that we dwell, in C. S. Lewis' words, in the Shadowlands where things are not quite as they shall be, but where we still may catch intimations of God's glory. Death has already been defeated and we are surrounded, whether we realize it or not, by those who have *fought the good fight* and *have kept the faith*. As a prefatory prayer for this day expresses it: "Their glory fills us with joy, and their communion with us in your Church gives us inspiration and strength as we hasten on our pilgrimage of faith, eager to meet them," (A. Adam, The Liturgical Year).

That is why standing in a cemetery to officiate at a committal service is like standing at the very precipice of hope. In the words of one of my great heroes, Thomas Cranmer, we utter, "In sure and certain **hope** of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother, and we commit his body to the ground," (Book of Common Prayer, 485). And if we have eyes to see, we can look over into that abyss and perceive, not just Thomas Lynch's great hole in the ground, but with the eyes of faith look even deeper down to catch sight of the great celebration of the Saints who have gone before. For in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, death is never allowed the last word. On this day, our pilgrimage brings us home to a place called hope.

It is a place populated by our ancestors, saints in Christ, who make up the **Communio Sanctorum**, the communion of saints (in which, every Sunday, we profess to believe), and who stand waiting to receive us once our journey is done. It is they whom we celebrate this day—they who inspire us for having led the way—they who surround us, invisible and unseen, as we gather at Table, to stand at yet another precipice of hope. Here Christ unites us with them to form His body, the people of God called forth to live and proclaim the Good News of the Gospel.

So take heart, my friends. To be a part of such a body, such a company of the committed, means to not be forgotten, but to be remembered and celebrated. But, even more importantly, it means to belong—to belong to one another, to belong to the world, and to belong to God, both now and forevermore. This is our calling; this is our hope; this gathering at a Table that stretches into time and space is an inkling of our home. And, if you listen closely enough, if you dare to listen with the ears of faith, you may even hear your own name being called. It's enough to make a grown man cry.