

All Saints' Day – Brian Hartley

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

I know that some people find the behavior quite strange, but I actually enjoy strolling through old cemeteries. And, this time of year, you get the added bonus of a panoply of added color as the maples, in particular, set loose their bright array of reds, yellows, and oranges. But, walking regularly through the land of the dead also brings with it the benefit of realizing both the brevity of life and the finality of death. Though there are some notable differences in the size of headstones and the quality of material and workmanship, each of us is limited to two dates, a dash, and the very briefest of epithets. No long homilies are to be abided on tombstones!

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. In fact, as Thomas Lynch has reminded us in his work, death has replaced sex in our culture as that most taboo of subjects, unfit for dinnertime conversation. And yet, for those who have recently suffered the loss of a loved one, the mere fact that words cannot be spoken endangers even that which we can recall through the power of memory. I think that is really what we all fear even more than death—the idea that we will not be remembered, that our story will not be told, that our presence on the earthly stage will be forever forgotten, 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 even before, thanks to the advent of a little red-headed boy into our extended family, known as Master Tristan Edward. I haven't yet entirely figured out how it was that I went from being a cool, young pastor and faculty member to being a graying grandfather. I distinctly remember the birth of my own two daughters and of reading them to sleep at night. One day I woke up and realized that they were becoming young women in their own right, dashing off to school to be with their friends. But then they followed me to my place of employment and it was like something of an extended stay. Until, that is, the ivy was clipped and they went off to work in other places to live out their vocation. And, then, one hot summer July day a few months ago, there was suddenly this little man, this wee boy, to remind me of the fragility of life. And so, I looked around for my grandfather to take his rightful place as family storyteller, only to realize that he had passed on a few years before. Then, and only then, it was that I realized that now it is my turn—to sit in the rocker, to hold my grandson, and to tell him the stories that have been passed on to me. Though I can only recall with any clarity about seven generations back, the responsibility for not losing the memories of Thomas Hartley, Revolutionary War soldier, escaping a British sloop docked off the coast of Virginia and of Nathan Thomas Holcomb, Free Methodist circuit rider who lost his chin in a Civil War battle, now rest thoroughly on my shoulders.

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 that we blast a hole in time and space and think about the church in cosmic 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.

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 with which they would have been surrounded. 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 and with their faces covered with a cloth. This is an earlier version of what my friend, David Cressy, has documented in his chapter on "Ritual and Reformation," 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 17th-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 which 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 preached 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 won’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 even 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.

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—something 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. As the good Platonist that I am, 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 the prefatory prayer to 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 my beloved Cranmer, “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 enough to see, we can look over that precipice and hear the sounds of 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. Thanks be to God!