

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – All Saints' Day**

**31<sup>st</sup> October 2021**

*Jane Quarmby, Reader*

Today we are celebrating two Christian Festivals – that of All Saints' Day tomorrow on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, and that of All Souls' Day which is on Tuesday the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Since the Middle Ages a yearly festival has been held to honour all the martyrs who have died for their faith in Christ, a celebration that in time extended to all those men and women in whose lives the Church as a whole has seen the grace of God powerfully at work – these are the ones we tend to think of when we refer to 'the saints'. Many churches and buildings are named after particular saints or, as in our church here, All Saints.

But also, a saint is anyone who is set apart for God's special purposes. In this sense, every follower of Jesus Christ is a saint. In most of his letters the apostle Paul refers to the recipients as saints, even when he wasn't too sure that they were leading very saintly lives. But it's comforting to know that we are all in our own way, saints, however well (or with difficulty) we follow Christ.

In the Anglican tradition, All Souls' Day (also known as the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed) celebrates the saints in a more local and intimate way. It allows us to remember with thanks those we have known more directly: those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith. Nowadays it is often celebrated in

churches on the same day as All Saints, as we are doing here. In France, where this season is kept as a public holiday, people travel all over the country to remember all those who have had an influence on them, celebrating their lives with flowers on their graves – especially chrysanthemums -, candles and meals as families.

In the Church of England's teaching about this season, it is said that 'redemption is a work of God's grace; it is God who redeems us in Christ, and there is nothing to be done beyond what Christ has done. But we still wait for the final consummation of God's new creation in Christ; those who are Christ's, whether or not they have passed through death, are joined in prayer that God's kingdom will be revealed finally and in all its fullness.'<sup>1</sup>

So, in this season, it's very appropriate that today's Gospel reading is the story of Lazarus and his raising from the dead. I can't help feeling rather sorry for Lazarus who having suffered an unspecified illness, died and was buried, was then brought back to life and became a marked man. He didn't seem to have any say in the matter and as the living proof of the power Jesus had from God was presumably much in demand as evidence of Jesus as the Messiah. But the flip side of this was also that the enemies of Jesus felt enormously threatened by the reappearance of Lazarus and wanted him straight back in the tomb before he had a chance to be seen by anyone. It is perhaps for this reason that the story of Lazarus is only in John's Gospel, which was written later than the others by which time Lazarus presumably had died again. Which is also really hard on Lazarus – having died once, he knows he is to go through the process again. We don't know what it's like to die, most of us probably fear the process of dying, but he knew what it would be

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<sup>1</sup> Common Worship, *Times and Seasons*.

like all over again. I can't help thinking that ignorance may well be a good thing when it comes to dying.

This passage raises a number of questions, to which theologians have found no simple answers – why, if Lazarus and his sisters were such good friends of Jesus, didn't Jesus set out straight away to see him and heal him? Why did he hang about for two days before going to see them by which time it was too late? Lazarus had been buried for three days when Jesus finally turned up. And as Martha points out, there would be a 'stench' if his tomb was opened up. Why was Jesus so upset to the point of bursting into tears when he did get there? Why was he 'disturbed' (or 'troubled', in the King James Version)? Why did he thank God for hearing him when he hadn't said anything out loud? Why did he do this showcase of a miracle in front of an emotional crowd weeping and wailing, when so many other times he told people to keep quiet about his healing of their loved ones?

Let's start from Mary, collapsing in front of him when he arrived, in floods of tears. After three days of mourning for her brother, she was it seems going down the path we've all been down in moments of real pain and crisis – the path of "if only" – if only we could put the clock back, if only we hadn't said or done something, if only they hadn't gone... Mary says if only you'd been here, he wouldn't have died. She's torn between faith that he could have cured Lazarus, and anger that he didn't come sooner and heal him. Is that why Jesus was 'disturbed'? He knew that he was going to bring back Lazarus – was he upset that Mary and the others had only got such a little way down the path of belief in him? Jesus knew he didn't have much time before he too was going to face death. In those two days that he waited before setting out, he had been praying, he hadn't forgotten about Lazarus, he'd been praying to God his Father. But he was moved by the grief he saw around him –

these people whom he loved, grieving aloud. He showed all too clearly here that God grieves with us. He shares our hurt, he feels our pain, our anger. Jesus burst into tears. The Word made flesh cries with his friends.

He is still 'disturbed' when he arrives at the tomb, disturbed that people still don't realise what he can and will shortly do. Disturbed that they are asking why he didn't heal Lazarus, not realising that he can do a lot more than heal. It's one of his last chances to show them what he can do.

When they roll the stone aside, Jesus thanks his Father for hearing him. His prayers have been answered – Lazarus isn't a rotting corpse, he's able to stand up and come out of the tomb, still wrapped in his burial cloths.

Imagine what the crowd felt when that happened. When a supposedly dead man walked out of his tomb. It must have been horrifying and joyous all at the same time, an enormous shock. And if no-one believed in Jesus as the Messiah after that, then no-one ever would.

So what do we glean from this miracle? Well, perhaps it is telling us a number of things. That we need to have faith that God is always with us, sharing in our pain as well as our joy, that God doesn't necessarily answer our prayers in the way that we would like, but in different ways. His ways are not our ways. That our narrow little hopes and requests are so often blown away by his generous largescale response. That death is not the end for us – that God can bring life in the most unlikely circumstances. That we are, often unknowingly, used by God for good and sound reasons even if we are completely clueless at the time as to what and why something is happening to us. But that if even Jesus needed to spend time praying and waiting, then how much more do we need to pray and wait for God to act in

his own good time and his own infinitely wiser way. Faith and prayer and patience need to be our bedrocks, not least when we remember all those whom we have known, who have already made that mysterious journey through death to God. May they, and all God's saints, rest in peace and rise in glory.

Amen.