

**All Saints**  
**29/10/2006**

**Mark the Evangelist**

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

**...Saints of God...**

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All Saints Day is the church's memorial day. On this day the church looks back to recall with gratitude the lives of its predecessors in the faith. The saints have no need of our praises, but our commemoration of them is a source of inspiration and encouragement to us. And because we tend to link this celebration with All Souls, we pause to remember our own people, whose lives remain painfully close, as we reflect on the past.

This day is a festival in honour of God's gifts to us in those whom we love, now gone. And it is a time for claiming the fullness of Christian hope in God through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The cover on the Order of Service pictures some of the more well-known Saints of God. The Rooster provides the clue to the first who is St Peter, to whom Christ gave the keys of the Kingdom. The second is the 4th C Catherine of Alexandria, who repudiated marriage with the Emperor because she said she was a bride of Christ. She successfully engaged in disputes with fifty philosophers called in to convince her of the errors of Christianity, and she protested against the persecution of Christians. Her torture consisted of being broken on a wheel (from which the idea of the Catherine wheel comes) but the machine broke down, which is why the spanner is there. She threw a spanner in the works of the Emperor, and for that she was beheaded. The third is St Francis, a lover of animals, who was called to repair the Church of God, and did so as an ambassador of Simplicity and Peace. The fourth is Mary of the Desert who, as a young woman, left her home in Egypt and travelled to Alexandria where she became a prostitute for 17 years. When she was 29, out of curiosity, she joined a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where she had a religious experience and went to live in the desert and became a hermit. Years later a monk called Zosimus met her and heard her story. She was by then dressed only in her own long hair, her clothes having worn out completely. Zosimus gave her his cloak and arranged to give her Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday. When he arrived she had died and a lion helped him bury her body. The fifth figure with the crow, the book and a shepherd's crook is Benedict who, with his sister Scholastica, preferred the love of Christ before all else and laid the foundations for the Western monastic tradition.

These are a few of those who have gone before us in faith. Some of the stories are fanciful some are not. These and many more are treasured by the church. As early as the second century Christians paused to commemorate those who were significant to them, giving priority to the date of their death because it was the date of their "birth into eternal life."

And so do we remember those we love.

Up until the Reformation the church tended to celebrate the saints past. After the Reformation, emphasis on the priesthood of all believers shifted focus to the present community of the church as saints. The meaning of All Saints is best kept if we hold both these together, remembering that the communion of saints includes us, and is a vast company of those whom we love, and those whom we have never known, which stretches through time and eternity. We believe that the saints in heaven have not abandoned us. We are still joined to them in faith, hope and love, and one day we shall all know the fullness of God.

The readings for today evoke a sense of both Easter and the End Time. The context they give us for remembering the saints is focussed squarely on the God who breaks into our history with an offer of new life. Because of this the tone today may seem to be about the past, but it in fact finds its point in our hope in God's promise of a new future.

Isaiah offers us a prophetic image of a feast prepared for all peoples on Mount Zion where Jerusalem stands. And Revelation translates the image of Jerusalem into one of New Creation. God, who created the world, can be counted on to redeem it. God wills to live amongst us, the beyond in our midst, and God's presence will be nurturing and comforting. Zion, or Jerusalem, represents the people who are gathered to enjoy the reign of God, which comes to them in fullness and completion from the future. Here is a rich communal life giving image, full of hope and promise. The near edge of its fulfilment is expressed in Jesus' eating and drinking with sinners, in the community he gathered around him, in liberating Lazarus from death, and in the Lord's Supper inaugurated as a foretaste of God's end-time banquet. Above all, Isaiah and Revelation prophesy that God will bring sorrow and death and mourning to an end.

We know what it is to struggle with death as anguish and despair, and we know what it means when death itself comes close to us. But here something is said that puts death in perspective. Death is not greater than God, and God wills to make an end of it. When Lazarus is raised we are shown that the force of life present amongst us in Jesus has changed the parameters under which we may live. That Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life means what is in him cannot be destroyed. And what is in him is shared with us. Although we live in the time in between the beginning and the end, and for us there is still death, a deeper truth has emerged. Because he has dwelt amongst us we have an inkling that God has begun to make all things new. This is cause for prodigious joy because it means the love God has for us does not wear out. It is always full, creative and surprising. Because of Jesus who called for Lazarus to be unbound and set free we know that although life for us will change it will not end. All Saints day is for celebrating that the new life of God is our future, not our past.

When you hear the stories of the saints it is easy to develop reverence for them. The reverence we feel is also rightly shown to **all** who belong to the church. Karl Barth said: Anyone who does not believe their particular part of the church is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, does not truly believe. We believe the saints past travelled this way, as we do now, and they wait for us at the end. Therefore, although death clings about us and we battle with anguish and fear, we may live in hope, for their source and destination is in God, and ours is too. Praise be to God, for all the Saints!