

All Saints
5/11/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Joshua 3:7-17

Psalm 107

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

All Saints Celebration

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Howard Wallace

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. Actually it was last Wednesday, 1 November, but we celebrate it today, the nearest Sunday after.

In Catholic Churches today is a day of celebration in particular for those deemed to have attained 'beatific vision' – ultimate direct communion with God in heaven. It is a national holiday in some Catholic countries. In many places the day is one for people to visit the graves of their relatives, lay wreaths and light candles.

Some of the traditions attached to All Saints Day can be dated back to the 8th century, for example the date on which we celebrate the feast, 1 November. But the idea itself and other associations could be much older.

While All Saints Day is often associated with people of faith of the past, Protestant tradition especially has brought a present aspect to the celebration with the idea that **all** of the faithful, the dead and alive, the past and the present, are saints. So the celebration of All Saints Day is not only a remembrance of those of renown who have gone before us, but a celebration of all the faithful, dead or alive, of the present community or one of the many of the past.

This idea of a broader definition of saints is not strictly a Protestant innovation. The idea is present to an extent in Catholic thought and the idea that those in heaven as well as those on earth constitute God's saints can be traced back even to the Book of Daniel. Nevertheless, the emphasis in many Protestant denominations has been on a more democratic notion of sainthood.

But as we think of All Saints Day this day, I wonder whether the real concern for the church, given our context, is not so much on the celebration of faithful lives of the past or the present, but on where and how will such faithful lives arise in the future?

The story from the Book of Joshua today is concerned with an issue pertinent to our celebration of All Saints Day within our present context. It is the question of the certainty and continuity of faith in times of change.

The leadership of the people of Israel as it moves from Egypt toward the promised land has just passed from Moses to Joshua. God says to Joshua at the start of the reading today that he will exalt him, not just to promote this new leader himself, but in order that the people may know that God is with him and them, just as God was with Moses (v.7). It seems that the purpose of leadership in that community of faith, and by implication the key point about belonging to the community, was knowing that God is 'with us'. It had to do with the awareness of the presence of God in the midst of life's experiences.

This point is driven home by the writers of the Book of Joshua again and again. They stress at the start of today's reading but also earlier in the book that God is with Joshua in a direct way, even as God was with Moses directly. Indirectly God is seen to be with the people still in the fact that the description of the crossing of the Jordan into the promised land strongly parallels the account of the crossing of the Reed Sea as Israel left Egypt. The land Joshua leads the people into is the very land which was promised to Moses. And earlier in the book, Joshua had been called to act in accord with the law Moses had commanded him and the others (Josh 1:7). Moses's law was to be the foundation of Joshua's activity and leadership.

This stress on continuity is not an end in itself, nor is it there just to underline the future success of the larger enterprise. Rather it is a symbol of the continuity of the presence of God with the people. That very presence has been the subject of many passages regarding Israel's wandering through the wilderness. The people have questioned it when they hungered or were thirsty; Moses himself doubted it at time and even wanted assurance of it late in Israel's sojourn at Mt Sinai.

It was the thing that was essential for the people's liberation from the powers of Egypt. It was the thing that was essential for their survival in the wilderness. And now it would be the essential thing in their taking hold of God's promise to them.

But as with Moses, so it was now with Joshua. Moses's leadership had not been a matter of whether Moses knew the Lord, but that the Lord knew him and was present with him. So it was too with the people. It would not ultimately be their faithfulness that mattered on their journey but rather the faithful presence of God with them.

The repetition of the statement of God's presence with the people in today's reading and other passages around this story stresses that God journeys with the people from start to finish. Indeed it is God's presence that is the guarantor of the completion of the whole exercise.

But while there is this promise of presence and completion in the text there is also a warning. A warning that the hardship of the wilderness journey – the doubt, the difficulty and even the disobedience that has plagued them – will still be with them as they enter the land. The life of faith (so often described as a journey even in our Basis of Union), is one where beginning and end are inextricably linked; where release from captivity of whatever form at the start is bound to promised liberty in the end. The promised hope of a life of faith is foreshadowed, embodied, in the journey itself. Our Christian pilgrimage already embodies its promised end. And the presence of God toward which we move, that 'beatific vision of the saints', the thing for which we all long, is already with us on the way, the guarantor of the fulfilment of our personal life of faith, of the life of the church, indeed of the whole of creation.

As we celebrate All Saints Day today we do not just remember God's faithful people of the past or of the present. We celebrate the presence of God with them as well as with us – a presence that transcends the limitations of this earthly life, the doubts, the difficulties and even the indiscretions we commit along the way. It is a presence that transcends even our uncertainties about the future of our community of faith. If there are to be saints in the future it will be because God will continue to be with us and them. Our task is to maintain that tradition of presence even in the face of doubt and to continue to open ourselves up to that saving and sanctifying presence in our lives.

Amen
