

All Saints
4/11/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

Unbind him, and let him go

Sermon preached by Andrew Gador-Whyte

Today we are marking All Saints' Day. We celebrate all people who have been made holy through friendship with and obedience to Jesus Christ. We celebrate the joy of the Saints, the ordinary people who now see God face to face, with whom we share the joy of fellowship in the body and the blood. We worship the Holy Spirit, who gives through relationships unbound from selfishness and hostility; the Spirit who incorporates us into the costly freedom opened to us by Jesus Christ.

In John's gospel today we have heard the last of Jesus 'signs', as John calls them, the last sign that Jesus does before his death. The raising of Lazarus reveals something to us about how Jesus will overcome the power of death in his resurrection. The sign also places Lazarus' healing and ours within the story of God with his people, which is about to come to its fulfilment in Jerusalem.

Our text begins with the anguish of Mary, who knows Jesus could have prevented the death of her brother. Jesus is deeply moved, indeed he weeps. Then when Jesus says 'take away the stone', Martha and no doubt everyone else is filled with horror. The stone represents respect for the dead, ritual purity, public hygiene, all the things Martha wants to preserve. But above all, the stone represents the finality of death, the reality we live under and are implicated in. But Jesus has not come to *respect the dead*, but to *make the dead alive*.

Jesus comes tearing open his friend's tomb, and seems set to expose himself to ritual defilement. And in a sense this parallels the event recorded in the other gospels at Jesus' death, the tearing open of the temple curtain. Because here and above all on the Cross, Jesus goes exactly to the place that is furthest from God, to the place where he will become the broken, the defiled, the accursed, and that is exactly where we see the holiness, the light of God, breaking through into our darkness.

Jesus' prayer reminds us of the high priestly prayer he will later pray for his Church. And when Jesus calls Lazarus into life, Lazarus comes like the high priest at the Day of Atonement, who entered through the curtain from the holy place sprinkling the people with consecrated blood. Lazarus comes not to defile the people as a dead body would, but to make the people holy. In the life he has given Lazarus, Jesus has not merely resuscitated him and taken away the grief and the defilement. Jesus has made him not merely *alive* but *holy*, and not a holy individual to be fetishised, but a means of others becoming sprinkled, tainted with the same holiness.

Now, Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb needing to have his eyes unbound to see where he is going. Just prior to this narrative, we have had the healing of a blind man. For John, Jesus has come to heal us of everything that separates us from God and one another – and in particular, to heal us of the darkness of self-deception and the world's lies.

Notice how Jesus orders Lazarus' neighbours to unbind him. Lazarus returns from the place where he was cut off from his people, even cut off from God. The dead man simply hears the word that he has been restored to his people, the word that God has come, paying no respect whatsoever to the weight of the stone that divides Lazarus from life and communion. God has reached out to our humanity and made life possible exactly where it had seemed most impossible. God has come among us, transgressing the alienation that seemed the thing that defined our humanity. And if God has embraced us unilaterally in Christ, not even death can divide us from one another.

When Lazarus' neighbours unbind him, John is saying we receive salvation as the gift of being unbound by our neighbours, who have simply heard Jesus' command, 'unbind him and let him go'. Salvation is being incorporated into relationship with people who know they have been unbound so that they may unbind others. In our baptism, Jesus meets us in sisters and brothers we do not choose, and he binds us to them in reconciliation, so that their lives become an invitation to us to be unbound from sin.

Salvation is opening our hands to the hospitality of God whose will it is to give his hospitality through the person of our neighbour. Salvation is becoming a source of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is allowing our humanity to become a means by which Jesus reveals himself, gives himself, to our sisters and brothers. Holiness is always received as a gift, and is always *for* the other. If we seek holiness, it is only so that others may be drawn into a holiness that does not come from us, only so that we may come to see God together, 'clothed in one another's virtue'. So, in a certain sense, desiring salvation can never be other than *allowing God to give through us to our neighbour*.

By the same token, the possibility of refusing God's salvation is only to be feared because we have been met in person by the unconditional love of God, and cannot contemplate the possibility that our lives might become so closed to love, that we refuse to allow God to give through us. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, it's only when the character of the father is revealed at the end that you mourn the elder son's refusal of that kind of love to his brother.

Evangelisation must begin not with a problem to be solved, but with the continual remembrance of ourselves as a forgiven people, a people who have been given the gift of belonging to one another. We begin with remembering that we have been unbound in order that our freedom, our righteousness, may be a source of our neighbour's becoming free and growing into righteousness.

Our contemporary culture seems increasingly to imagine that the outermost darkness is dependency on others. Because our culture has come to believe falsely that the *centre* and source of life is the autonomous self. God's Church must strongly resist our culture's seeming intention to eliminate dependency, whether at the end or the beginning of life. Because we have seen in Jesus that the centre of the world is not an independent self, but rather that place of utter weakness and abandonment where Jesus gave Mary and the disciple to each other. It is in the place where God chose what is lowest and weakest and most foolish, that he has opened to us that life together where the weakest and most dependent among us are precisely the most indispensable to us.

I met a woman who had come into hospital because of a wound which had become worse from her rubbing and scratching it. She spoke forgetfully and couldn't tell me how the wound had started. But what she kept saying was: 'I'm a minister of the Catholic Church' – that's someone who takes communion out to people who are sick.

Our culture has so many words to minimise that person's humanity, to demean people with cognitive impairment. But she knew she was God's servant and a servant of God's Church. And she was continuing to give God to others, and even to give God through her own weakness.

That's what being a Saint is – coming to Jesus in the only way that we can come, with our hands empty, to be filled with the gift of feeding our neighbour. Being a Saint is simply Jesus standing next to a person and saying of them, *'this is my servant, my labourer in the harvest. This is one of my holy ones through whom I make the world holy.'*

All of us who believe in the one who said, 'I am the resurrection and the life' share with the saints at the Lord's table. At this table we placed in a new relationship of responsibility to one another. Here our lives become, like the saints', an invitation to others into a deeper obedience to Jesus Christ. And if many Christians ask the saints to pray for them, it is essentially out of a Christian intuition that the closer people grow to God in love, the more open they become to God giving through them.

And if, as we usually say, all of us who are baptised into Christ are the saints of God, then our lives have become essentially what the saints' risen lives are – an enduring means of God giving through us to the world. And however broken we are, whatever our infirmities or moral failings, however mundane or frustrated or chaotic our lives may be, at this table we see in our sisters and brothers the face of Jesus Christ and the faces of all those who are alive in him.

Jesus raised Lazarus so that the world might know that not even death can prevent us from being the gifts that God gives to the world. Just as Jesus prised open his friend's tomb, in Jesus' passion God became what is weak, and foolish, and low and despised, and claimed that place as the centre of the world, and the source of our life.

Just as Lazarus was unbound through the obedience of his neighbours, we enter salvation through the invitation of the repentant lives on whom we depend. And having been met by the forgiving love of Jesus Christ, we have been set free with Lazarus so that we too may listen to his voice breaking open the tombs, and lead our neighbours and our enemies into his life.
