

All Saints

John 11:32-44

So after the increasingly commercialised celebration of All Hallows Eve, or Halloween as it is commonly known, we celebrate today All Hallows Day, or All Saints' Day. Just like Christmas eve is almost a feast day itself as it points us to Christmas Day, so Halloween has become a stand-alone event, but unlike Christmas, for most people the celebration ends at Halloween. All Saints is barely perceptible, there are no cards or gifts to recognise it, most people would be unaware of its existence let alone its significance. So how come we get all excited for the commemoration of things sinister & evil and but pay little or no attention to those people who stand and have through the ages stood in stark contrast to this, live out lives of goodness, truth and love?

Let's consider our gospel reading, the raising of Lazarus. We know that Lazarus was a friend of Jesus and his followers, he was a supporter of Jesus' mission at least in so much as he often had Jesus and the 12 staying at his home in Bethany. Lazarus was the brother of the 2 sisters we hear mentioned a number of times in the gospels, Mary the one who stops to listen to Jesus and Martha the one who is constantly busy in her serving of Jesus. These 2 women have become a metaphor for the balance required in Christian living, working in Christ's name and taking time in prayer and study. So this was the household at Bethany. It would appear there was no wife for Lazarus, no children, because the women caring for him were his sisters. Lazarus also cared for those women. At a time when women had no status and were often as good as items to trade, families would pack them off with a dowry to a seemingly suitable husband for no other reason than they were expensive to keep. Lazarus, however, supported his sisters. We don't know the reason, perhaps he had not found a wife so enjoyed having women around to do the cooking and housekeeping, but looking at the way they each complemented the other and showed such love towards one another it seems there was more to it than that.

Could it be that Lazarus, like Jesus, held women in society in higher regard than others and was unwilling to treat his sisters like property? Had they been married in unpleasant circumstances and like Jesus' words on divorce, had they been the victims of cruel ex-husbands and it was Lazarus who had been there for them when they were cast aside? We don't know, but it is interesting to wonder sometimes about the back story of these biblical people.

In any event, this family had just faced a tragedy, Lazarus had died. Jesus was informed that he was ill but seemed to deliberately delay going to him. That was odd, Jesus had cured many sick people from many different illnesses, it wasn't much to ask that he would do that for his friend when he regularly did it for strangers, you would think. No, Jesus didn't rush to Bethany, he waited, and when he did arrive Mary, the devoted one, was there to meet him. She seemed to be in that confused state that grief brings about in people, she so wanted to see Jesus, to be comforted by him, to know his care for her as a friend but equally she was furious at him for taking so long, because having delayed his arrival it was now too late, Lazarus was already dead.

The people mourning Lazarus' death had the same view of events as Mary did, how come, they said, how come this man who can restore sight to the blind couldn't

prevent this man from dying. There was no hope now, he had already died. These followers of Jesus, Mary and Martha, had every faith that Jesus could have stopped this from happening, but now it has happened, it is just too late. Jesus asked to see the body. Martha, ever the practical one, tried to stop him, there will be a smell she says, don't open the tomb of a dead person, it's undignified and unnecessary, he's dead, we know he is, we don't need to see him again. But Jesus insists and the miracle of life triumphing over death is performed.

Lazarus gets up, walks out of his own tomb and resumes his life with his sisters in front of many witnesses in his community. Even later in the gospels the writers refer to Lazarus being the talk of Jerusalem at Jesus' last visit to the holy city so there were none really disputing the story, many didn't understand it but they had no choice but to accept it. Jesus caused a dead man to live. He had done similar things before but not quite so publicly and this but the end was approaching for his ministry on earth and there was a definite change of pace from here on in.

Well that's a wonderful story, you might think, but how does it really affect us and what does it tell us about All Saints. Well the effect on us is one of hope. This is one of those encounters with Jesus that is hope inspiring for everyone there and all who have heard about the miracle since. Jesus arrived at a house in mourning where there was no hope, lots of discussion of what might have happened had things gone differently but no hope of what would happen next and how to move forward. Jesus offered hope to those people. He demonstrated in a limited way that he is not bound by death, he is not like the rest of us, not only could he perform miracles of healing in God's name, he had the ability to see beyond what humanity had understood to be the end of the road. Later, by his own death and resurrection Jesus would offer that hope to each of us so that by our own dying to self and rising to new life in Christ, we too would no longer be held in fear of an earthly death but rather live in hope of what is yet to come.

This hope is the inspiration of all saintly living, be it among the big name saints who have special days set aside for them or the little saints that move amongst us living with and sharing with others the hope they have found in Christ in the day to day things they do and say. Today is a celebration of all those saints, too numerous to mention but living resurrection lives in the hope of Jesus. The people who gave their lives to martyrdom as an alternative to ever denying Jesus or turning their backs on him and the people who gave their lives to quiet, unrewarded service within their families, communities and churches. They all have one thing in common, and that is the hope they found in Jesus, and they all played their part in the mission and ministry of God in the world.

Lazarus was entitled a saint in the Church as a result of his miraculous resurrection but his saintly living was borne out in his care for his sisters, his hospitality towards Jesus and his disciples and his faith in continuing to speak the truth of Jesus even though the authorities were out to have him silenced because many believed in Jesus because of Lazarus' evidence. Being a saint is not primarily about the big events, it is about life lived in hope and faith. So as the world recovers from Halloween and its themes of death and evil with no real answers to the questions it raises, we face a new day in hope, the hope of Christ, the one who conquered death and by whom we

need hold no fear of it, rather simply trusting in Jesus the one who offers hope where there seems to be none.