

All Saints 2024

A Sermon on John 11:3-44

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May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen

There is probably nothing more lonely than bereavement, especially when it is the death of a loved one that is unexpected or tragic. That feeling when you are perhaps travelling back from the hospital death bed or in the car on the way to the funeral and you look out of the window and see people carrying on life as normal and you are almost screaming in your head 'How can they be laughing and going about their business when the world has forever changed because my loved one is no longer here'

In the Gospel today we hear about the grief of Mary and Martha over the death of their brother Lazarus. We hear anger from Mary, which is quite common in bereavement 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' and a resigned despair from Martha 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.'

They are bereft and feeling very much alone. To begin with Jesus joins them in their grief- he weeps and is greatly disturbed by the loss of his good friend Lazarus. And then he carries out his great miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead.

For Mary, Martha and his followers then this was a great foretaste of the resurrection to come and brought them much comfort and joy in their moment of despair. We can, of course, also draw great comfort from the hope of the resurrection and the eternal life we are promised through Jesus.

We know that, as the reading from Revelation tells us today, there **will** be a time when death will be no more; we will dwell with God, and he will wipe every tear from our eyes.

But sometimes we need even more help to get through the difficulties of this life; those times of loneliness, pain, grief and despair. Being frank about it- life sometimes stinks -just like the stench of the tomb of Lazarus. And this is when we need to remember that Jesus told us very clearly that he came to give us life in abundance in this world here and now, not just in the world to come.

When Jesus calls Lazarus out of his dark stinky tomb you can almost imagine Lazarus yelling back 'No, I can't. I'm all wrapped up and bound by death. There's no life left in me. I have nothing left to give. I just can't do it anymore. Besides, it's too dark. I can't see my way forward.'

But he takes a step forward and that is what Jesus encourages us to do in our most desperate moments-to find a way to not just keep going but also to find peace and joy again in our lives.

Today we mark the Feast of All Saints, which is a celebration, as well as a reminder that we are always walking in the footprints of those who have gone before us. In the Anglican church we obviously recognize the Biblical saints such as St Peter and St Paul as well as those later canonized by the church such as St Francis.

But we also state our belief in the 'communion of saints' every time we say the creed. This is because the church states that a saint is any person who has received salvation as a result of Jesus' resurrection. In other words, every ordinary Christian - for we are all called to be saints.

Saints may have died, but they are not dead. Their lives have changed, not ended, and their presence is real. They have laid a path before us marked with their footprints of prayers, love, teachings and actions. They are our guides and encouragers on our journey of faith. All Saints is a time when we are invited to think of those people who have influenced us in the faith.

Above all, what the saints do teach us is how to live life abundantly even when life is difficult. Abundance might be mistaken for 'having more' in the sense of a quantity. But abundance is much more about the condition of our soul. Abundance is the medicine that heals our soul of its scarcity. And it's what we need - we need our soul to be made whole, to be made well.

Jesus is always calling forth abundance from what looks like scarcity. He turns water into wine. He feeds five thousand with five loaves and two fish. He calls dead Lazarus out of the tomb. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says very clearly "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" and a slogan of Christian Aids states 'We believe in life before death.' We owe it to those who have gone before to live life abundantly.

Abundance is not about gaining things but rather seeing things differently to how the rest of the world may see things. Our work is not to 'get an abundance' but rather to release the abundance that is already ours through Jesus. We shouldn't ignore the pain of the world or our life, but let abundance rather than scarcity be our default setting. That's what changes and transforms life. As Jesus says to the sisters "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

That is what the saints did despite going through very difficult trials. Think of St Paul in prison or St Peter wracked with guilt over his denial of Christ, then persecuted in Rome. They still offered words of comfort and examples of hope and abundance.

A particular favourite of mine is Julian of Norwich, patron saint of the anxious - an anchorite who chose to live in a cell, for all purposes "dead" to the outside world. Some believe that Julian was a young widow who had lost her family to the plague and that she turned to living this way in her grief.

She had intense visions and during one of these she pronounced the famous and perhaps over-quoted *All things shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well*. She doesn't say this like the Monty Python Song 'Always look on the Bright Side of Life' but rather as a statement of what Christ's incarnation means. On certain days, if we can push through our anxieties to what lies beneath, we may feel this to be true and have our fears subdued. If not, it remains true, nonetheless.

Knowing that God loves us unconditionally changes and transforms our lives. Rather than moaning and feeling sorry for ourselves we can trust the plan that God has for us. I'm not thinking here of those who sadly suffer clinical

depression or mental health issues – that’s illness, but rather something to help us when we feel fed up or overwhelmed.

Think about the times you’ve experienced abundance and how your life was transformed - perhaps the day a child was born, or a day when the beauty of the world around was so amazing that all you could say was, “Thank you.” Or picture the face of that one who sat with you in your darkness day after day waiting with you until the light of a new day dawned.

And this is another secret of living life abundantly - recognising how much you gain from living a life of service to others. Saji reminded us a couple of weeks ago of the importance of following Jesus by serving others. There is a little experiment that I used to do with students – which you can do in your heads now. The question is – at Christmas do you prefer getting presents or giving them? The older the students got the more they would say ‘giving ‘as you probably did in your head - well hopefully. We understand that what makes us the most content is making others happy.

So go on - live abundantly!