

St Brandon's 31 October 2021. All Saints

Psalm 24: 1-6

Revelation 21: 1-6a

John 11: 33-44

Part of the plot of Thomas Hardy's great novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* hangs on a mistake made between churches in the same town, one named All Saints and one, All Souls.

The confusion is understandable, and as we mark All Saints today, I want to distinguish it from All Souls, the festival we mark on Tuesday with our annual service in the evening, in which we remember loved ones who have died, give thanks for their lives, seek God's hope and comfort.

Today however, as we mark All Saints, on this Sunday closest to 1st November, we celebrate all Christians who have lived as pilgrims following Christ, those who have gone ahead of us on the journey, as well as those we walk with today, for we include all Christian women and men, poor and rich, unknown and famous, long dead and alive today, all the saints, each one known and loved by God.

We remember today that the church across the world is far greater than the Church of England, the church in England, or the UK, or Europe.

There's much we can learn from the global church, as we're discovering in our Thursday evening prayer services this

term,
and day by day as we pray for the global church in Morning Prayer.

using the USPG prayer diary- if you'd like to join in this, please let me know and we will get you a copy.

For me this is a daily reminder that we in England are a very tiny part of the global church- all the saints of God today. This month, during COP26, we will be praying with them about climate change and its impact around the world.

Yes, we are members of the global church, all the saints of God today.

All Saints is also the day when we remember that the church 'triumphant' as it's sometimes called, is far greater again than the church struggling on earth.

Those saints who have triumphed over death now rest, with Christ, awaiting the new heaven and the new earth.

It's here that our theology may feel wobbly; we may enter a fog of uncertainty about what happens after death, mixed in with angels, white robes, clouds, harps and a few cherubs.

Thanks to today's powerful Bible readings, we can see much about death and heaven, on this All Saints' Day.

Our gospel gives us part of the long account of Jesus raising Lazarus from death.

It leaves out the early stages – Jesus' decision not to rush

back to Bethany to heal Lazarus, but to return later, four days after he has been buried- he even tells his disciples that this is for the glory of God.

It misses out Martha's honest encounter with Jesus, his declaration

'I am the resurrection and the life',

and her response,

'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.'

Martha fetches her sister Mary, still at home with the mourners; she comes out to meet Jesus on the road, near the burial ground outside the village and she, like Martha, greets him with regret and accusation,

'If you'd been here, my brother would not have died.'

Jesus' first response is **compassion**- he weeps with the sisters.

He's not afraid to show his deep love for his friends, and that love drives all that follows.

Then he asks to see the tomb and, to their horror, for the stone to be rolled away.

'He's been dead four days, there's a stench already'

says Martha.

These details leave us in doubt that Lazarus is really dead.

They show Jesus' **courage** in confronting death as it really is, the rapid decay of our physical bodies once they no longer have breath and life in them.

Then comes the **command**, just three words in Greek and not even a verb: *Lazarus! Here! Out!*

At which Lazarus, still wrapped in grave clothes, stumbles from the tomb, his body restored and working once more, though I expect he needed a good bath.

Unbind him, says Jesus, and let him go.

Set free by Jesus from death, Lazarus will die again at the end of his earthly life, but this miracle demonstrates beyond a doubt that God has power over death and decay, that resurrection will happen. This amazing story, so brilliantly told by John, reveals the glory of God, and shows us what Jesus wanted his followers to know about death

Firstly, his **compassion** for those who mourn when death separates them from their loved ones.

Secondly, his **courage** in the face of death, which can be ours too as we go through the reality of pain, loneliness, anger and despair, for Jesus walks with us.

Finally, his **command** over death, for it is not the end. Jesus has conquered death and as Mike told us last week, God's word brings life – new life, resurrection life.

And so to heaven – or rather a new heaven and a new earth- John's vision in Revelation 21 of what is to come when the old order, the world as we know it, passes away.

This new heaven and new earth will never end. It will be untainted by evil, selfishness, illness and pain, a place of perfect love, beauty and peace, and it will be our eternal **home**.

God himself will make his home with his people,
God the source of all life and love, creativity and power,
God who is Alpha and Omega,
the beginning and end of all things.

And death will be no more, that's the promise.

But that's big leap from Lazarus' tomb, or from a dismal crematorium or a dark graveside.

We still have to live in the in-between of
'thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.'

We still have to live within the constraints of earthly time,
not knowing the *when* and the *how* of either death or
resurrection,
for our loved ones and ourselves.

But, as we believe and trust in Jesus Christ, we can know,:

- God's compassion and courage as we face death
- God's command over death
- God's promise of rest for his people who pass through death to be with him
- God's promise of new, resurrected, bodily life in the new heaven and new earth which are to come

For ultimately, all the saints will be freed from the tyranny of time, and enjoy life in all its fulness, with God for evermore. Amen.