

Chichester Cathedral
All Saints Day, 11.00am Sung Eucharist, 4 November 2018

All Saints Day sounds like a cheerful sort of Festival; and yet all our readings have been about death. But perhaps that's the point: today is a day of cheerfulness and joy precisely because the reality of death, which none of us can escape, is put into perspective – the perspective of the death-destroying, life-affirming God revealed in the story of the raising of Lazarus. Isaiah and Revelation offer powerful visions of God's future, in which all nations and peoples are welcomed to a great feast, the tears are wiped from every eye, and death is no more. In John's Gospel there is a foretaste of this future, as God's power over death overturns the grief of Mary and Martha.

This is the context in which we give thanks for all the saints: the lives of our predecessors in the faith, both ancient and modern. And amongst these we recall with gratitude those who have personally influenced us; those, to quote from the 1928 Prayer Book, 'whom we love, but see no longer', those who have shaped our lives for good.

There is a marvellous prayer by John Donne that expresses pretty much everything I want to say about not only 'All Saints', but also this celebration of the Holy Eucharist, in this particular place: 'Lord, teach thy people to love thy house best of all dwellings, thy scriptures best of all books, thy sacraments best of all gifts, the communion of saints best of all company'.

'Best of all company': this profound insight is manifest around us and beneath everywhere in this cathedral - in the memorials to a whole panoply of people who have worshipped here before us, and played their part in the mission of this cathedral, diocese, and beyond. And then there are the windows, amongst them a whole series of Chichester figures facing me as I preach from this pulpit. And at the heart of it all is the figure of Jesus Christ, pictured in various ways in glass, paint and stone, perhaps most powerfully of all in the twelfth century depictions of this morning's Gospel, the Lazarus reliefs on the south quire aisle. As of last Friday, following careful restoration work and new lighting, these magnificent carvings can now be seen as never before, powerfully witnessing to the compassion of Christ, and his ability to bring new life from the decay of death.

Some of you may be wondering about those who have died, who in life were difficult and damaging. And indeed those memorialised in the cathedral cover a wide spectrum of humanity, to put it kindly. Well, there is another prayer which speaks of God bringing to perfection the good work he has *begun* in all his creatures. In some there will be far more to be accomplished than in others! And if this grace continues to work in all the faithful departed, what will they be like whose lives in this world already displayed exceptional marks of Christlikeness? What more has the grace of God achieved in them? How much more like Christ is St Richard of Chichester, or

those whose goodness has personally helped and inspired us? No wonder they make such good company.

In John's Gospel, Jesus performs seven 'signs' during his public ministry, and the raising of Lazarus is the last of these. The previous signs range from turning water into wine and the feeding of the five thousand, to the healings of a royal official's son and a blind man. I am referring to 'signs' rather than 'miracles' deliberately; this is the language John's Gospel uses. The danger with miracles is that those seeing or hearing of them are so amazed or indeed perplexed, they forget the bigger picture. The role of a sign, however, is to point to something else. The point of the raising of Lazarus, extraordinary as it is, is to direct attention away from the events in themselves to the overwhelming reality of a death-destroying, life-giving God. Or, to put this another way, we are meant to see through the events at Bethany to the underlying divine grace that make them possible.

And this Johannine theme of signs pointing to God, also applies to the already mentioned memorials and windows of this cathedral, as well as its chapels and indeed the shrine of Richard of Chichester. In that shrine there is a fine icon of our most famous saint: fine both in terms of the painter's artistry, but also in terms of its theology. For there is St Richard, wearing his bishop's mitre, carrying his pastoral staff in his left hand. His right hand, however, is lifted up just above shoulder height, directing the eyes of the viewer to the figure of Jesus in the top left hand corner. The point is clear: Richard is a saint because his life pointed away from itself to the one he sought to 'know, love and follow'. We are not to remember Richard or any other influential person of faith as though this remembrance was a kind of religious version of celebrity culture.

That culture is about personal fame, and often about money, with celebrities earning vast sums from selling details of their lives, or endorsing particular products. If any Christian disciple starts to think their achievements are really about them, then things have gone badly wrong.

In Leicester Cathedral there is the tomb of another Richard, not a saint but a king, King Richard III. The Dean there, David Monteith, followed me as the curate in the parish of All Saints Kings Heath in Birmingham, and he told me about the careful thought that went into the placing of that tomb. Richard was hardly an unblemished character, and his tomb has been deliberately positioned just outside a chapel with a 'Christ the King' window – and so earthly kingship is set in proper relation to divine kingship. At the resurrection of the dead on the last day, Richard III will stand before Christ the King, tears will be wiped from every eye, and feasting can begin.

There is something powerfully consoling about today's readings, and the one from Revelation is often heard at funeral services. But it's worth noting what unites all three of them – tears, and weeping. Jesus weeps in response to the tears of those mourning Lazarus. Isaiah talks about the taking away of 'disgrace', and Revelation

of an end to 'pain'. It's also true that all three readings are thoroughly social. At Bethany it is a whole community who mourn. In Isaiah the feast encompasses all the nations, and in Revelation we hear of a heavenly city.

If we aspire to be included in this heavenly company, this 'communion of saints', then that 'communion', as I indicated earlier, will be with some of the people who have let me down, and others who I have let down. There will be tears, and all things will be made new, presumably through a process of reconciliation and mutual forgiveness, before those tears can be wiped away. How this is accomplished I cannot fully say, beyond that it must be bound up with the Christ who wept for others, and showed the death-destroying, life-giving nature of God not only in raising Lazarus, but in his own crucified death, and resurrection on the third day.

A final mention of the fabric of this place, this time of the grassed area bounded by the Cathedral cloisters, known as 'Paradise'. After years of being kept locked, this area is now open to all, and new signage is being prepared to remind visitors of Jesus' promise to a thief crucified alongside him: 'Today you will be with me in Paradise'. There will also be an invitation to remember those 'whom we love, but see no longer' and to reflect on our own lives in the light of the reality of death. The final quotation on the sign is from the fourteenth century mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing*: 'All the time that is given to thee, it shall be asked of thee how thou hast spent it.'

Speaking of time, it occurs to me that I recently passed the eleventh anniversary of my arrival in Chichester, and what a privilege it is to minister in a place in which the company of the Saints is so tangible. This is a place built to the glory of God that has always sought to be a place of healing and hope, despite the inevitable frailties of its people. I know that by the grace of God, it will carry on being a force for good into the future, and I know this, not out any naivety about human nature, but because it is a community gathered around the person of Christ. All the good that any of us can do depends on whether or not it points away from ourselves to the grace and glory of God. So it is has been with all Christian disciples down the centuries, and so it will be until the last day.

Today we rightly celebrate all who have worshipped and served here before us, but ultimately this cathedral is founded not upon their lives in themselves, but rather on the manner in which those lives pointed to Christ. And on the journey towards the fullness of the kingdom, by the grace of God, we are learning 'to love [God's] house best of all dwellings, the scriptures best of all books, the sacraments best of all gifts, the communion of saints best of all company'. AMEN.