

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

All Saints Day Yr B 1 November 2015

Isaiah 25.6-9 Psalm 24 Revelation 21.1-6a John 11. 32-44

All Saints – do you think this is a day to celebrate people who are not like us? Or a day to take seriously God's intention that we become like them?

We are letting ourselves 'off the hook' if we think the saints are different. We are kidding ourselves if we admire them, but make no effort to imitate them. If we treat the saints as prize exhibits in some Christian showroom that we visit from time to time, we are missing the point of today's celebration

A saint is a person who is being released from the unhealthy love of themselves, willing to give themselves to the love of God and neighbor – that is, the imitation of Christ.

This way of behaving is the opposite of what Tony Abbott was urging past this week in London. Abbott told his audience to set aside the imperative to 'love your neighbour as you love yourself' because it is 'misguided altruism' and leads to 'catastrophic error'. To which the answer is 'yes, possibly and sometimes quite likely' but unless we do our clumsy, costly best to love our neighbour we betray our own humanity.

Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian famously said, 'humanity that is not co-humanity, is in humanity.' Inhumanity was something Karl Barth experienced first hand. In 1934 he lost his job as professor of theology in Bonn because he refused to swear allegiance to Hitler. Seeing the shape of things to come in Germany he supported the newly forming German Confessing Church that refused to co-operate with the growing fascist state.

The confessing Church produced its own saints and martyrs, most significantly Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The German state hanged him in the last days of the war, having imprisoned him for his opposition to Hitler. And Bonhoeffer could have sat the war out. At the time it was declared he was in America. He came home for love of the Lutheran Church in Germany of which he was an ordained pastor.

Living as a saint doesn't come cheaply. It is not easy. It doesn't come naturally. It comes super-naturally, as we allow the grace of God to work in us, changing us.

In the story of the raising of Lazarus we see God at work in Jesus to challenge the ways things are by showing us how to live as if they are no longer.

Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick but he delays going to Bethany. When he finally does turn up, he discovers that Lazarus is dead and buried – four days before! People are mourning, wailing in the way that the culture required. A wailer didn't have to like, or even know the dead person, they just had to wail in the prescribed way.

But Jesus is indignant. The words John uses say so. Yes, Jesus is himself moved by Lazarus' death, but he is indignant at the assumption that the way things are is the only way they ever will be. He shudders with indignation. He orders the stone moved away from the

entrance to the tomb. He calls Lazarus to come out. Rules are broken – contact with the dead is impure; hard, difficult things asked of people - and Jesus makes no apologies.

And one of the most remarkable aspects of this story is that Lazarus is expected to move while still bound by his grave clothes. No waiting until Lazarus is all fixed up, 'perfect' 'got his act together' - or whatever any one might imagine ought to happen before God brought him to new life, or us.

Only when Lazarus stands before Jesus is he finally freed. Only *then* is he unbound from the shroud and freed from the grave. Lazarus' life is restored *as he responds*, not afterwards when he has. *His life is changed by responding*, not as a reward for doing so. Lazarus must make an effort to change yet paradoxically the change is entirely the work of God's Spirit.

'God will swallow up death forever,' the visionary Isaiah cried out. The biblical texts today about life and death are wild and bold. They are uninhibited by our cultural limitations. They speak to longings we can barely articulate. These readings do nothing less than reimagine death. The raising of Lazarus is the last great sign in John's gospel. It shows us yet again that Jesus does what God does. "I and the Father are one", Jesus has already told us.

The dis-grace of death is taken away *now*. The shroud that held Lazarus, the shroud over all life is removed. Jesus' promise begins to be fulfilled: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

And what is that glory? It is a human being, fully alive to God, the ones we call saints; the ones we are called to be like; the saintliness, the Christlikeness, we are called to be. The saints lived in the light of resurrection. They lived the fullest humanity, God was growing within them.

Not for them the fear of strangers, the rejection of the vulnerable, the use of force to maintain privilege. Saints will take the risks of love because they are no longer caught in the shrouds of fear that hold so many from living out their fullest humanity

So whose company would you rather keep – the fear mongers and resorters to force, or those willing to risk becoming human as they respond to the voice of Jesus, the fully human One sent from God to show us the way?

After Jesus healed the lame man at the pool with five porticoes in Jerusalem and he was under attack because that day was a Sabbath, he said the time is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. The time is coming, he continued, when those in their graves will hear and come out...

We are those who are being called to be saints today – are you responding and being changed?

Colleen O'Reilly, Vicar.