

## All Saints Day

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 4 November 2018

*Readings: Revelation 21.1-6a and John 11.32-44*

November is definitely here, even if yesterday's weather suggested otherwise, with the beginning of the month marked by two complementary days of remembering – All Saints Day and All Souls Day. All Saints Day is the day when we remember Christians who are treasured as saints, as men and women of particular influence and transparent holiness who do not carry the formal title of 'saint'.

Unlike the Catholic Church, the Church of England and the churches of the Reformation have no formal process for making saints in this way. True, our calendar does allocate days when we remember various individuals, such as some of the martyrs of the twentieth century. Above the west door of Westminster Abbey, one can see the statues of martyrs of the twentieth century, including Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, martyred in the Russian revolution a century ago, and Oscar Romero, assassinated in 1980 because of his opposition to the injustices of El Salvador. He was canonised by Pope Francis last month, but his statue has been at the Abbey since 1998.

These are only a few. In any case, official declarations merely confirm what is already in the consciousness of the Church.

All Saints Day takes on a particular significance for us. It is a wonderfully all-embracing day of celebration that we are surrounded, in the memorable description of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, by 'so great a cloud of witnesses'. They are encouraging us to keep the faith and make our way through this life to the heavenly banquet.

The Revelation to St John, the last book in the New Testament, is a strange and difficult book, with language and images that seem almost alien to our experience and strain our imagination. The essence of the book is a vivid description, using the style of language that was a familiar part of the philosophical debate at the time when St John wrote down these words, of the current situation of the world. God is the almighty sovereign, but his rule is acknowledged only in heaven and in the hearts of his people on earth. Otherwise, life is marked by injustice, persecution and rebellion against God.

St John has written about Jesus' sacrifice as promising the resolution of this conflict. In chapter 21, we find a magnificent hope for the entire cosmos. God's act to bring this present age to a close is seen not only in terms of his plans for his people, but in terms of his plans for the whole of time and space. The alienation of the world from God is finally resolved – symbolised by the city descending from heaven. God creates a new heaven and a new earth, where he will live face to face with his people, and where they will suffer no more.

As God's people, we are called to follow the way of the saints and to tell the world around us that God really is making all things new – that God really wants to transform us into saints. Through Jesus, we are God's sons and his daughters – and this challenges us, in turn, to make a difference.

St John gives us this great cosmic hope, over-arching and all-embracing. Rather overwhelming, perhaps. But before we get either too confused or too excited, we can check this out against what Jesus tells us.

The story of the raising of Lazarus gives us the other side of the same picture, with its focus on the believer's personal hope in Jesus, who is 'the resurrection and the life'.

The story may relate to one individual, Lazarus, one of the inner circle of Jesus' friends and supporters and part of the household at Bethany where it seems possible that Jesus could resort for rest and refreshment. But at the same time it reveals in a touching way the personal commitment that Jesus makes to us – which complements the commitment he invites us to make to him. Jesus' love for Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, coupled with his anger at the sufferings humans experience in a fallen and broken world, moved him to tears. And of course, Jesus feels equally passionately about each one of us.

The raising of Lazarus is an astounding miracle, one of the amazing signs which Jesus performs in St John's Gospel to point to his God-given authority and his identity as God's Son, God breaking into the world of human experience.

This miracle tells us something of the most profound significance: through his resurrection, Jesus has opened up the way to life for all who trust in him to follow. Through Jesus, death is not the end, but merely the prelude to a new, transformed life together in the presence of God.

The saints, in their amazing variety of experience and personality, have, perhaps, been those most able to grasp and witness to this truth. How much we need the encouragement of that 'great cloud of witnesses', as we seek to be faithful to God's call in our generation. May they inspire you, and me, as they surround us with their unseen love and prayers.