

All Saints Sunday

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 31 October 2021

Readings: Revelation 21 verses 1-6a and John 11 verses 32-44

'Take away the stone.'

'Lazarus, come out!'

'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Today's Gospel story is remarkable. In John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the event that makes Jesus' death inevitable, at least in the eyes of his enemies. After Lazarus was raised, the religious and political leaders were focused on eliminating him. Jesus is distraught: weeping, disturbed, maybe even angry, and certainly grief-stricken. And yet Jesus is fully in charge, not operating on our preferred timetable, but on his own with a larger purpose in mind, that of encouraging trust or belief in the crowd that had gathered.

You can hear the sternness of Jesus' voice as he commands his servant with a loud voice, powerful enough to bridge the gap between life and death. Lazarus was not just some person living in the area whom Jesus had never met. Jesus knew Lazarus personally, and he loved him deeply. Lazarus was a close personal friend - this is a fascinating reminder that Jesus had a circle of friends who were different to the disciples. When Lazarus fell ill, his sisters, Martha and Mary, immediately sent a messenger to Jesus to inform him of the impending death, with the clear and confident expectation that Jesus would immediately save their family from this pain. After all, this is the same Jesus who has healed complete strangers from every multitude of pain, deformity, and disease. Surely, they think, Jesus will move quickly to save somebody that he actually knows and loves. But Jesus does not react in the manner in which anybody close to him would expect. Instead of dropping everything and rushing to get to his friend's side, Jesus continues what he is doing and waits.

Both Mary and Martha believed that Lazarus was on his deathbed. Jesus knew that Lazarus was dying. But he waited.

Four days after Lazarus died, Jesus finally showed up in Bethany. We can easily imagine the scene on that day. Martha and Mary are deep in their grief and they are sobbing at the loss of their beloved brother. When Jesus enters the house, we might expect that his reception was not a pleasant experience for anyone. The sisters were upset, and they lashed out at Jesus by saying that if he had actually cared enough and come right away, then their loved one would still be here. They were angry; they were grieving; and they were distraught. It is shocking but important to hear that raw emotion, knowing that we can safely vent our anger and frustration in our prayers, in our conversation with God. If you have any doubt about this, look at the Psalms, where almost every human emotion can be found.

Mary articulates what many of us feel when someone close to us dies: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus doesn't directly respond to this. Instead, he begins to take charge, first finding out where the body is and then issuing a series of short commands:

'Take away the stone.'

'Lazarus, come out!'

'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Instead of caving into their distressed words, Jesus asks to be taken to the tomb. Upon arriving, Jesus orders that the tomb be opened. Immediately, he is rebuked by Martha, with a very practical response. Lazarus had been dead for four days. There was no embalming of the body. No air conditioning to improve the atmosphere. When somebody died, they were placed within the tomb as soon as possible, and the door was sealed. The stench of the tomb after four days would have been too great. But Jesus again ordered the tomb opened, and the family finally obeyed him and had the stone rolled away.

'Lazarus, come out!'

Ignoring the comments from the gathered people, the stench from the open tomb, and the sly comments, Jesus prays to God and commands Lazarus with a loud voice. We are witnesses to Jesus' confidence in his God-given mission and his authority. In just three words, Jesus was able to dispel the notions of death, proved the power of God, and exposed himself, yet again, as the only Son of God.

Even after death had overtaken him, Lazarus still obeyed God's command. Jesus proved that he had authority both in this life, and in the next.

When Jesus finally had arrived, Martha and Mary believed that their brother was gone, never to return. Martha and Mary were distraught over the death of Lazarus, and yet they put their human feelings and emotions away, and obeyed the commands of Christ. Lazarus, although he was dead, also obeyed the commands of Christ.

Is it too much to ask of us that we simply obey Jesus' commands, that we respond to what Jesus expects of us?

And that is what separates the saints from the sinners. Today, as we celebrate All Saints' Day, we are honouring all those who have come before, all those with us now, and all of those yet to come who have obeyed the commands of God at all costs. Today we are celebrating not only those whom the Church formally recognises as saints, but also those who have not been so recognised. As Christians, we hold these saints in high regard, and rejoice in their inspiration and their love.

As humans, we have often neglected to appreciate, in every sense of that word, the true humanity of these saints and instead revere them as living nothing but holy lives. The truth is these men and women were just as human as you and I. All of them were, are, will be ordinary people. They just had extraordinary lives – extraordinary, because they set their minds on God, and demonstrated often remarkable and selfless love for other people.

And they want the same for us. They surround us and love us and cheer us on – seeking to draw us deeper and more fully into the life of God, so that his love overflows from us into the world around. Sunday by Sunday, we proclaim the praise of God with the angels, archangels and all the company of heaven – including those saints we remember and grieve and are grateful for and celebrate this day.

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

And those most important words in this service: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. When our worship ends today, if you listen intently enough, you may just be able to hear our Lord standing outside the doors of this church, calling each of us out into the world, that is, out into *his* world, to spread his message, to fulfill God's plan, to be his saints.