

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021**  
**All Saints' Day**

**Collect**

God of holiness,  
your glory is proclaimed in every age:  
as we rejoice in the faith of your saints,  
inspire us to follow their example  
with boldness and joy;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**Revelation 21:1-6a**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said,

'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

**John 11:32-44**

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

## Sermon

When I taught secondary history, we used to set homework projects for the children to complete. One such project was entitled, “Heroes and Villains” and the children had to research a character from history in order to decide whether they were a hero or a villain.

In retrospect it probably wasn’t the best project title, playing too much into the hands of a modern media obsession with putting people on pedestals only to take delight in pulling them back down. Nevertheless, the project was actually based on serious historical skills. As the children worked through each section, they were encouraged to carry out research on their chosen individual, find out whether people had different opinions about them, and thereby develop their understanding of historical interpretation. While the title meant that we had a fair number of projects about Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill and Hitler, those children who chose a character like Margaret Thatcher were often able to produce the best project. People really did – and do – have different opinions about Margaret Thatcher’s leadership, and arguments can be made on either side.

Every year when we celebrate All Saints’ Day, I find myself thinking about the heroes and villains of those projects and wondering whether a better title would have been “saints and sinners”. It’s not language we’re especially comfortable with these days – especially the language of sin – but when understood in the context of Jesus’s teaching, I wonder whether the language of sainthood and indeed sin warrants rehabilitation.

As a starting point, I wonder if you have come across that rather wonderful quote of Oscar Wilde: “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.” Taken from “A Woman of No Importance”, the words in context actually seem to suggest that the life of saints is dull, the story of their lives is concluded, while the life of sinners is more exciting, with all to discover. Yet Oscar Wilde as poet and playwright was highly sophisticated in his use of language. His interest in Roman Catholicism, coupled with his own life experience, will doubtless have made him alert to the subtleties of the quote, whatever its meaning to the characters in the play.

Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. What makes this quote especially relevant on All Saints’ Day depends on our recognition that we are *both* sinner *and* saint. That’s why I think these are better words than hero and villain. It is probably fair to say that very few of us would identify easily with either of those terms. Whereas it lies at the heart of our faith to acknowledge that we are both saint and sinner. While the language of sin has become unpopular, not least because it can lead to an unhelpful guilt, in our services each week we come before God in penitence because we know that we get things wrong; that we make mistakes; that we are in need of forgiveness. And, just as importantly, each and every day, there are also ways in which we join in with the work of the saints. Through a kind word; an act of generosity; a readiness to forgive; or whatever it may be.

And so, if at one and the same time, we are both saints and sinners, the quote from Oscar Wilde – every saint has a past and every sinner has a future – connects us with our past, present and future. Our lives become dynamic. We need not be defined by our past – though it is part of who we are. And the present is lived in hopeful expectation of the future. It is a perspective that encourages hope, yet cautions against judging others.

Our gospel reading of the raising of Lazarus is not, perhaps, the most obvious one for All Saints’ Day, yet it is curiously relevant.

There is little doubt that within John's gospel the raising of Lazarus was in some ways intended to prefigure Jesus's death and resurrection. Yet the connection between the two is as much to recognise the differences as the similarities. John's gospel is full of signs, each pointing to the identity of Jesus. Bringing Lazarus back to life is a sign of his divinity. Only God can do this. Yet it is also a sign new life. To reduce any miracle to one message is to miss its point. This miracle sees Lazarus, who has died, brought back to life. Yet it also speaks to anyone who has experienced new beginnings or new hope in their life. The writer of John wants us to know that God is in the business of bringing life, and of transforming life.

Yet, while Lazarus has been restored to life, we know that he will die. This is where his raising differs from Jesus's resurrection. And the difference is as significant as the similarity.

I often think that the reason the first and second commandments speak about God, and especially about having no other Gods, is because one of the greatest human tendencies is to want to be God. To create God in our own image; and to believe that we can escape from the realities of our humanity. That is part of the message of Adam and Eve. Their sin involved wanting to have knowledge that only God can have. Wanting to elevate themselves above their own humanity.

The gospel reading shows us that Jesus understands our humanity. More than that, he actually experiences it. He knows how it feels to experience the whole range of human emotions. It is central to our faith that God knows and understands us, and wants to be in relationship with us. Yet our calling is not to be God, but rather to grow in relationship with God. Raising Lazarus reminds us if we needed it that our lives matter to God. Our focus is not simply on what happens after death, but rather on life itself. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus says to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life." Resurrection *and* life. There is an eternity. And there is also life here and now.

On All Saints' Day we are reminded that our calling is to be saints. And that the calling to be saints sits alongside the understanding that we are also sinners. That's not a cause for inappropriate guilt or self-loathing. It simply sets the context.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus's harshest words are reserved for the Scribes and the Pharisees. Those who somehow believe that they can rise above their human nature, making them self-righteous and intolerant of others.

By contrast, Jesus spends a lot of time with sinners. Just as with the woman caught in adultery, his counsel to them is to "go away and sin no more." Yet in his relationships with sinners he is neither harsh nor uncaring. Indeed we see that through those relationships sinners' lives are often transformed. Not so that they never sin again, but so that they recognise their calling as saints.

Perhaps this All Saints' Day we might commit ourselves to our relationship with God, recognising that we are all both saints with a past and sinners with a future. And that everyone else is, too.

Amen