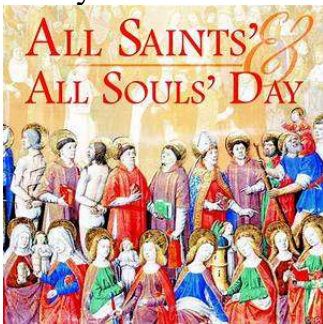


ALL SAINTS – REVELATION 21.1-6a, JOHN 11.32-44

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Today is Halloween – for Christians, the Eve of the Feast of All Hallows.



Tomorrow, 1 November, is All Saints' Day, closely followed on Tuesday by All Souls' Day – and most churches do what we've done, move them to today. I love the fact that All Saints day gives us the opportunity to think about the great names of the Church – Peter, Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Edmund – though I do wish we were better at including the women. Hilda of Whitby, Etheldreda of Ely, Julian of Norwich, and then I run out of female names So we have to remind ourselves that saints are not just the big names, the men who resonate through history, there have also been hundreds and thousands of female Saints – and, even if we're not good at remembering them, God knows.



It is right and proper that the book of Revelation has the vision of a bride. It is my pleasure to welcome lots of beautiful brides – none, of course, as beautiful as the vision of loveliness that walked down the aisle at St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, on Saturday 3 December 1983. (I hope you're impressed with that!!). Even this old cynic loves the look of love. One bride this

year was quite late, and as I walked past the groom on my way up the Nave I said something like “she’s worth waiting for.” “She’s lovely” he said – wait till you’ve been waiting for her, week in and week out, I thought. But I didn’t say that!



In Revelation John looks forward to the end of time, when somehow heaven is fused with earth – and it is perfectly acceptable to use the language of pictures. Think of Jerusalem, the Holy City, imagine the new Jerusalem, a heavenly version – imagine the colours of a rainbow, imagine stunning light and music, imagine the most beautiful bride you can think of – roll them all together, and you are still nowhere near the vision of heaven.

The vision is that God is with us – the home of God is among mortals. God is not in heaven, somewhere vaguely “up there”, God is here with us. “He will dwell with them” – just think about that “with” for a moment. God here, among us – “the word became flesh and dwelt among us”.



And it matters that God is with us, because we need a vision bigger than humanity. Men and women can be wonderful, men and women can be a huge force for good – but men and women are also evil, selfish, out for their own benefit and gain. In this week of COP26 we will see vision and determination and humans trying to build a safer, better world for all – and we will also see vested interests, and financial interests, and selfishness – we can’t make the changes required, it will cost too much. Humans are perfectly happy to let the poor starve, their agriculture be destroyed, their homes and livelihood flooded, as long as that means we can continue to drive our cars and fly in our planes, and live a lifestyle which is probably unsustainable. We saw it in the budget this

week where children need foodbanks, yet we cut the duty on champagne – may God forgive us.

We need to add spiritual dimension to this conference – a dimension which says that this is God’s creation, and we are merely his stewards. Which says that it is a very good creation, and we must cherish it. A dimension which says all human beings are made in the image of God – not just rich, white, male human beings, but all human beings – we are made in the image of God and our duty is to care for each other. A spiritual dimension which recognises evil as a powerful force – and is willing to stand and fight against it. A spiritual dimension which believes miracles are possible, and humans are capable of doing amazing things, because we are made in God’s image – so let’s be positive, hope and pray – and take the actions that we can take that will make a difference.



This world is heavenly, it is a beautiful place, and there is a huge amount of love. That love transforms lives. I had a gorgeous visit yesterday from Ben and Jen – we married them here almost three years ago, they now live in Solihull, posh bit of Birmingham, but they want to bring their new baby Lola here to be baptised on 5 December. So they came up to see me yesterday and, despite the weather, we had a walk in Darley Park, and it was lovely to catch up. A little vision of heaven for me.

God is with us – and people recognise him in so many different ways – and he is making all things new. He is the alpha and the omega, the A and the Z, the beginning and the end – nothing is outside his love.



I was surprised they gave us the gospel reading of Lazarus for All Saints Day, but I suppose it makes sense. A man who died, went – we hope – to heaven –

and then was called back. I wonder what he thought about that. I also wonder how he faced his death the second time round, presumably several decades later.

One of the comments I read about this story this week, is the fact that Lazarus says nothing, no where in the gospels does he open his mouth. He is the brother of Mary and Martha, they have plenty to say – perhaps he was unable to get a word in edgeways (I will make no comment on that). When he died, Jesus spent longer getting to them than he ought to have done, and Mary is not happy. “Lord, if you’d been there, my brother would not have died.” She’s angry, she’s full of grief, and she takes it out on Jesus. Her grief, the grief of those around, it all gets to Jesus – he is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved”.



I know the depths of grief, but I also have to be professional at the funerals I take. I always say to families that there are three people who can’t try at a funeral – me, the organist and the undertaker. We have to hold it together – and that’s not always easy. This afternoon we have our All Souls’ service – I struggle when the names are read out of my boys, but I have to hold it together. But I also have to be human – no one wants clergy who don’t care, no one wants a church that doesn’t care, no one wants a God that doesn’t care. (I have no doubt the reason so many funerals now take place at Crematoria, with services led by all sorts of officiants, I have no doubt the reason is because the church doesn’t seem to care – if we don’t welcome and care for people right through their lives, if we’re invisible and our buildings are locked, what a surprise that people don’t turn to us in death. May God forgive us for our failure).

So often it seems as if God is an angry God, a vengeful God, a God who sends suffering and death. “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away” – well yes, life and death are in God’s hands, he knows when we will die. But God understands and shares our grief, and he promises life after death – the vision of heaven. There will come a time when “Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”



Going back to the Gospel - “Unbind him, and let him go” says Jesus – and you can imagine a rather dazed Lazarus blinking in the sunlight, and trying to stop his sisters removing the linen clothes before he could get to his clothes. But you can also imagine the joy and celebration, and laughter and tear of joy.

We deal with people – this is personal. God is involved with people, with you and me - we do not live our life in isolation, we are created and sustained and blessed by him. Even when we are in isolation, even when we’re sitting separately and we’re masked – we are still together, we just have to find new ways of making that work.

POST COMMUNION PRAYER

The post communion prayer gives us the idea of a heavenly feast – Strangers and pilgrims on earth, joining the saints in heaven. That’s not a bad picture to end on. I like the idea of heaven being a feast – and there I won’t have to worry about the calories. Amen.

Peter Barham, 30 October 2021