**T’is the season to remember**

……this title seems a suitable title for today’s sermon as we now enter the season of remembering and remembrance and has been very challenging material to work with; I had a distinct feeling that there could be a genuine prospect for confused theology.

Although we are celebrating All Saints Day today, it is in fact all Saints Eve, All Hallows Eve, Halloween and there will be a lot of children running around in various ghoulish outfits trick and treating in their neighbourhoods.

All three of our readings are suitable in considering the multifaceted subject of death and resurrection for this season.

The Book of Common Prayer talks of those departed saints who are specifically revered and honoured as examples of “virtuous and godly” living. But, if we think of them as simply in the context of their images in stained-glass windows, the dusty ashes of the past and irrelevant to us then we would be grossly misunderstanding their continuing association with us. in All Saints Day we are remembering not only the known and honoured saints but, as the title implies, ‘all saints’ whose names are generally forgotten but who, as the Book of Common Prayer in the Communion service states in the thanksgiving prayer - are gathered up in The Church Militant. It is a day to remember the unremembered, the nameless multitude of the faithful, the communion of saints, both in heaven and on earth and, if you are a Roman Catholic, in Purgatory too. Now, I could go on, at this point, and tell you about how the Reformation tore away the faithful from their understanding of death and the life hereafter in the departed but I don’t think you will thank me for doing so, but if you want some understanding of the profound shift it had in theology and subsequent ministering at funerals, then Shakespeare’s Hamlet is not a bad place to start.

So, moving swiftly on from that subject we turn to our readings for today which are in tune to the season of remembering and remembrance. The words from Revelation 21.4 – “he (ie God) will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” are familiar words from funerals and Remembrance Day services.

According to James Bond we only live twice – once at our birth and second when we look death in the face. According to our Gospel reading about Lazarus, we learn that it is possible to die twice. We are not told what Lazarus thought about returning to life nor what he thought about experiencing death a second time.

This is one of the most dramatic moments of Jesus’ ministry. When Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter in Mark 5, he ordered almost everyone out of the room and when it was over told the witnesses not to tell anyone. By contrast, in this account, he stands in front of a large crowd, puts his reputation on the line by calling Lazarus to come out of the tomb. And, Lazarus duly does. What a moment that must have been. Just put yourself there in that crowd and think about your thoughts at that moment. Surprisingly, it isn’t the raising of Lazarus back to life that is the most extraordinary part of this passage but the link we have between two puzzles that we are otherwise presented with.

Firstly, we have the unanswered comment from Martha, the fussing anxious sister of Mary. ‘Master’, she says “you can’t take away the stone! There’ll be a smell!’ She knew perfectly well that her brother, having been dead by this time, for some four days, would have started to decompose, particularly in the heat. This is the reason for burials to take place within 24 hours in many places and within Judaism and Islam.

John doesn’t provide us with Jesus’ response, other than the oblique comment – “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” i.e. if she believes she will see God’s glory. Somehow, what he is going to do will achieve that.

The nature of ‘being’ remains mysterious, elusive. The story of Lazarus death and return to life shows us the power of Jesus over life and death and does suggest that Jesus could have chosen not to die. Earlier on in the chapter, in verses 3-5 when informed of his friend Lazarus’ illness Jesus’ response was: “this illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it” And yet Jesus then remained in that place beyond the Jordan for a further two days. By crossing back into Judea and raising Lazarus, he provides the authorities with the prime and immediate cause of Jesus condemnation. You could say that in effect he was crossing from this world to the Father. The irony of this event is that it was above all Jesus’ gift of life that immediately led people to put him to death. Jesus is the light as shown in healing the blind. More profoundly he is the life as shown in raising Lazarus. This, the last and greatest of his miraculous signs, remains a sign, a promise of what he will do when glorified. But it is a sign that touches closely on reality, the natural life given here is a pledge of the supernatural life to be given by the glorified Christ.

The actual description of the miracle clearly recalls Jesus’ earlier promise: “for the hour is coming, in which all who are *in the tombs* shall hear his *voice* (ie … of the Son). And they who have done good shall *come forth* unto the *resurrection of life* . The crowd will cry out four times when calling for Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus cries out to give life, his enemies to bring death to Jesus. Note that Lazarus emerges from his tomb encased in his burial clothes, Jesus emerges with his neatly stowed in the tomb. Lazarus will need his again, Jesus will not.

To try and understand the message better and the other part of the puzzle we need to look at the darker aspect of the story. When Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15 writes about what is corruptible or perishable, he is not talking about moral decay but rather the disintegration of the physical body. John emphasises the fact that Lazarus was well and truly dead rather than simply sleeping when Jesus approached Bethany with Martha’s words – Lord, there is already a stench because he has been dead for four days”. Jesus has the power to rescue it and the man Lazarus from that decay. The resurrection body in contrast that Jesus, Lazarus and, in time, us too, will assume will not be like that.

Neatly, our Revelation reading reinforces John’s message. At the end of time, of history, chapter 21 envisages the end of death. And Isaiah too was inspired by a similar vision. In the mind of Isaiah food and drink were not pointers to moral indulgence. Instead, like the resurrected body, they were transformed into images of divine generosity of the life that is promised to those who keep the faith. And this can only occur if physical disintegration has come to an end and when instead Christ will “make all things new” in the new Jerusalem where there will be, as John Donne wrote in 1627 – “no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity”.

In our current age we are not much given to reflecting on the resurrection of the body. Society has pretty much shielded us from the visible processes of dying and death. If you look at the art and poetry of earlier times and wander round old churchyards looking at the monuments you get a better sense that death is all around us and that there is never a bad time to remember that in the midst of life we are in death. But at least on All Saints Day we remember too that in the midst of death, we are in life.

Christians have only one way to obtain “the victor’s crown of gold”, together with the great cloud of witnesses who Christ “by faith before the world confest”. The light withers and yet Christian hope burgeons, preparing us for life eternal.

What’s the take away message for us in all this complexity - according to the final chapters of Revelation, God chooses to make his home with redeemed humanity. The beautiful vision of the new Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God” illustrates God’s desire for all human beings to find their true home with one another, or, to put it another way, to be saints, living icons, in God’s presence. This can only occur in an act of new creation: “see, I am making all things new”. There will be judgment against those who reject the call to holiness and homeliness with God and one another; those who reject God’s trust cannot endure the heavenly city.

But ending on a positive note of hope – in life eternal we shall “carry up our affections to the mansions prepared for us above, where eternity is the measure, felicity is the state, angels are the company, the Lamb is the light, and God is the portion and the inheritance” (Jeremy Taylor). Now that sounds pretty good to me! Amen

Mary Lee, Oct 2021

See Stephen Greenblatt’s “Will in the World How Shakespeare became Shakespeare” about William Shakespeare’s life and living through the impact of the English Reformation. Published by Pimlico 2005, ISBN 0-7126-0098-1

See also Eamon Duffy “The Stripping of the Altars” :Traditional Religion in England c1400-c15.80. Published by Yale University Press 1992, 2nd edition 2005, ISBN 0-300-10828-1