

A Sermon for All Saints

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

One of the trends of our time has been a sudden upsurge in the desire to trace family roots, to find out where you have come from and how much of what has become the story of your own life finds echoes and patterns in the lives of ancestors hidden in the distant past. The BBC has recently run a high profile series on just this theme in which celebrities trace their family connections. They titled the series 'Who do you think you are?'. I have to say that tracing my family roots is something that has never had much appeal to me, but rather unsuspectedly I have found myself in the midst of a not dissimilar process instigated by my parents house move. My parents dream in retirement has been to leave behind the city in which they have lived all their lives, and to build a house from scratch in the deepest Welsh countryside. Two years ago they bought a scrap of land at the foot of a mountain, which stretches back towards the Irish sea over which their parents had travelled to start a new life in Manchester 60 years earlier. The strange thing about witnessing my parents preparing to begin a new life has been understanding the desire that this has prompted in them to sort through their belongings and to begin quite consciously looking death in the face.

Part of their response to this has been to start handing back the fragments of our childhood. So this weekend I have become the proud owner of items as various as my birth certificate, and my several years worth of correspondence with the tooth fairies. But alongside the bag of dried up baby teeth and tooth fairy letters were the carefully preserved religious artefacts of our childhood: our first sets of rosary beads, the long lost correspondence between my father and an inspirational nun who had been a teaching colleague, writing on the news of my safe delivery of the hopes she had for my life. These lay alongside tatty Mass cards and pretty prayer cards illustrated with images of the saints like illuminated manuscripts waiting to brighten your life when the Sunday sermon got too long. These were childhood faith images that stood like enticing postcards to foreign places and other lives, inviting you to jump in and join the adventures of the saints. Quite unexpectedly and without warning I had found myself dusting off and opening a Pandora's box of religious memories and artefacts and being touched by stepping back into a now distant landscape of taken-for-granted domestic faith. For most of those amongst whom we live and work such taken-for-granted faith is now a foreign landscape, a world of family faith and pious devotion reached only now through a box in the back of a wardrobe, on the cusp of a changing season. Who do you think you are, I wondered?

This is a season in the life of the Church in which we are experiencing just such identity questions, when the power of encounter with the past encourages us to ask questions about who we are and who we are called to be: we find this intensely in these two days as we celebrate the lives of the great cloud of witnesses who have acted in faith and have communicated powerfully to the world what it means to believe in Jesus Christ and his promise of new life. For many of us we find it all too acutely tomorrow as we remember those who have died, shuddering with grief for those we have loved as Jesus does when he faces the reality of Lazarus's death in today's gospel. Bereavement invariably brings identity questions in its wake. And yet these identity questions are also questions that on the cusp of a changing season we are asking about Westcott House, questions about our part in the future of an Anglicanism shaped around a growth towards holiness grounded in attention to Bible, Sacraments and Social Justice.

All Saints is, then, a feast which comes to us today as a day of blessing at a time when our souls and our churches are often troubled. It is a feast, that like our return to this Church, should encourage neither nostalgia nor triumphalism but rather I want to suggest a two-fold movement of celebration and re-commitment. This feast celebrates the extraordinary carnival of faith which we are able to reach out and touch through the lives of the saints. The extraordinary variety of this carnival and of those the church calls 'saints' is surely sufficient warning against any rigidly narrow idea of the church. Today marks the celebration of a church which must keep its doors open wide enough to encourage an expansive understanding of both human existence and response to God's call. Yet, amidst the noise of celebration and surrounded by our strange and vast family of faith we are presented tonight with another quieter, stiller moment that we can almost miss, this is an opportunity on this day each year to re-commit ourselves personally to our own part in the renewal of the life of the church, a re-commitment to respond to God's call to sainthood in our own lives, in this time and in this place.

In John's gospel this evening we are presented with the remarkable story of the raising of Lazarus, the final miracle before Jesus' own passion and resurrection. In this narrative, consistent with today's feast, three minor characters take centre stage along with Jesus, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Each acts as a foil to the great Christological themes of this Gospel and to themes which lie at the heart of what it might mean to be called to sainthood for our own changing times.

It is Martha, the great model of the church domestic and the church faithful, who takes centre stage first. Martha is presented as a faithful woman who in the face of the trauma of bereavement questions Jesus, hoping for at least the consolation of understanding. In her moment of despair Jesus responds to this desire for understanding by sending her forth, like the Samaritan woman at the well before her and the women at the tomb on Easter day after her. Martha is sent out to fetch Mary. Martha moves here from confessor to witness, from her two statements of faith in this passage 'I know', to a full statement of 'I believe'. This is surely the journey of the saints, canonised and ordinary, and the journey that we are called to make from confessors of faith to public witnesses of faith in Christ.

Mary is then the second key witness to the unfolding miracle of life about to happen before them. Unlike Martha's response to grief which seeks understanding, Mary responds by throwing herself at Jesus' feet in total lament. This draws forth one of the most moving and powerful expressions of emotion and humanity from Jesus as he breaks down and weeps with her. Through Mary we see Christ's deep sharing in our humanity, his sorrow at our loss. In an age where the formal apparatus of Christian language has become strange, our capacity to share with others this sense of Christ's deep humanity in the face of the losses of our times is likely to be crucial to the act of self-giving love that is the shared centre of all sainthood. Of course Mary's response to Jesus' gift later in the gospel is to smash a jar of expensive oil and using her hair to tenderly anoint Jesus' own body before he faces his final journey through death.

What of Lazarus, our final minor character and the silent centre of activity in this passage? Through Lazarus we see the sign of liberation, of resurrection and new life which Christ wills for each of us. It is surely too a message of liberation for those trapped in living deaths in our midst, it is a call to raise to voice the silenced, to serve the oppressed and to fight for justice for those who have none. The call to sainthood for our times must touch this unclean territory too, and Lazarus, whose name means 'God Helps', is our resurrected reminder.

As this new century spreads its wings the feast of All Saints teaches us something that we still struggle to learn. That the landscape of faith is vast and is constantly changing and that new saints are needed to transform the lives of those who suffer, saints with extraordinary imagination and stubbornness, wilfulness and faithfulness. And yet of course some of the landscape of faith remains the same, the ordinary saint hidden in our congregations, passing unnoticed is still about her domestic work as the world changes around her, she is age-old and the same as ever, and today is her feast too. These are the saints who we will meet and sometimes will pass by all too quickly in the business of our ministry. How to recognise her? Perhaps someone who comes close to capturing this is the science-fiction writer Ursula K Le Guin. In *Dancing at the Edge of the World* she creates a story of secular sainthood that gives us some clues. She imagines that a space-ship arrives searching for one exemplary human being from whom an alien race can learn about the potential of humanity. Le Guin picks from a market place a woman over sixty who:

...has worked hard at unimportant jobs all her life, jobs like cooking, cleaning, bringing up the kids, selling little objects of adornment to other people. She was a virgin once, then a sexually potent female, and then went through the menopause. She has given birth several times and faced death several times – the same times. Every day now she is facing the final birth-death a little more nearly. Sometimes her feet hurt. She was never educated to anything like her capacity, and that is a waste and a crime. She has a stock of sense, wit, patience, and experiential shrewdness.

Le Guin explains that this is a woman who has accepted the whole human condition, the most essential quality of which is providing loving constancy whilst accepting the constant reality of change. As many of us anxiously excavate the past for clues to our identity, on this great feast of the church domestic we celebrate receiving an invitation too good to refuse, an invitation to come home to our true selves, and in so doing to re-commit to the costly call to sainthood that God continues to extend to each of us.

Amen.