

For All the Saints

Last Sunday was a remarkable day. Those of you who were here met in the Great Hall, and after a brief kerfuffle over technological troubles you figured out how to have church anyway, celebrating being together as the Trinity community. Those who were at the diocesan convention in Des Moines worshipped in a hotel ballroom with a band and five bishops, including Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, who gave his usual dynamic, rousing, Jesus-filled sermon. He's a hard act to follow, and I am better off today because not many of you actually saw him preach.

Yesterday I was back in Des Moines at St. Paul Cathedral for their ongoing celebration of twenty-five years as a cathedral. They had invited the Very Rev. Gary Hall, retired Dean of Washington Cathedral, to speak on the purpose of cathedrals. I was invited to be part of a panel working with Dean Hall, as I'm at a cathedral that has been around for a hundred and fifty years. Apparently St. Paul's is still trying to discern what it means to be a cathedral community. My challenge was to articulate what I and all of you simply absorb by worshipping in this magnificent building.

Perhaps it's because I knew that yesterday's conference was coming, or that All Saints Day would be celebrated today, that I have been more aware lately of the presence of the many people who have come before us in this place. I know I'm not the only one who feels that way. Bishop Scarfe says that whenever he comes here, he is very aware of all of the bishops who preceded him. They have all celebrated the Eucharist at the High Altar, right back to the first Bishop of Iowa, Henry Washington Lee, who built this cathedral. Trained as a scientist, I'm not accustomed to talking about spirits floating around, but I do believe in the presence of those who have gone before us, just as I believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine that lie within the tabernacle behind me – the reason we have a candle burning at all times nearby. It's worthwhile to reflect on what that presence means on All Saints Sunday.

Our first reading today began with “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God.” Those who study Scripture know right away that even though it is attributed to King Solomon, he could not have written it. If you read your Old Testament carefully, you'll see that in ancient Jewish tradition all of the dead go to a shadowy place called Sheol. There's no mention of the immortality of the soul. That's a Greek belief, not a Jewish one. Even the New Testament focuses on the resurrection of the body rather than the immortality of the soul. Yet we still find it comforting to think of the souls of the righteous in the hand of God.

Both the first and second readings today have an overwhelming sense of consolation. There is much grief that we no longer see or hear the dead. To say that they are in the hand of God, at peace, abiding with God in love – that is great consolation for those of us who are left behind. Even more so is the promise that we hear at the end of the book of Revelation. After many chapters of woe and desolation, we hear John's wonderful vision. A *new* heaven and a *new* earth appear, and the holy city comes down from heaven. At long last death will be no more, crying and pain will be no more. We will never again be separated from God, for God will be with us and will wipe away every tear from our eyes. How I yearn for that time to come.

We're given an inkling of what it will be like in the Gospel of John. Jesus has come back to the vicinity of Jerusalem to be with his dear friends Mary and Martha, whose brother Lazarus had recently died. Just before the passage we heard this morning, Martha ran to greet Jesus and received his assurance, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus is now in the presence of Mary and the mourners, showing his full humanity by weeping with them. He goes to the tomb of Lazarus and asks that the stone be rolled away. Martha protests because, as the King James Bible puts it, after four days Lazarus "stinketh." Jesus insists and the stone is rolled away.

Notice what Jesus does next. He prays. It's an odd prayer, too. Jesus doesn't ask God to do something. He knows that God already has done it. Instead, he prays out loud so that the people will know that God hears him, that he is the one in control, so that they might believe in him. Only then does Jesus cry out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man comes out. He who was dead lives again. It is a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus himself, who will arise from the tomb not only alive but with a transformed, resurrected body. Lazarus is revived with his earthly body, yet he will never be the same again. If you doubt that, just ask anyone who has had a near-death experience. Their lives are forever changed.

Lately I've been reading Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century theologian and brother of Basil the Great, to whom is attributed Eucharistic Prayer D in our *Book of Common Prayer*. Gregory often talks about the infinite goodness of God. Because God's love is inexhaustible, he says, we continue to grow in love and goodness even after we die. As the catechism in the back of our prayer book says, "we trust that in God's presence those who have chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is."

So what about all of those whose presence we feel in this place? They are part of the communion of saints spoken of in the Apostles' Creed. They lived on this earth as we do, sinners redeemed by the love of God and the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are the great cloud of witnesses who surround us. Yes, we miss those whom we loved and are now gone, but taken up into Christ, we meet them again in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Their presence is part of the Real Presence. They invite us just as Christ does in that wonderful communion invitation from Iona:

Come to this table, you who have much faith

And you who would like to have more;

You who have been here often

And you who have not been for a long time;

You who have tried to follow Jesus,

And you who have failed; Come.

It is Christ – and all those who have gone before us – who invite us to meet them here.

[All Saints Day: Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44.]