

Feast of all Saints

1st November 2009

Year B

There are two collects from which we may choose for All Saints. The first speaks of 'those inexpressible joys that [God has] prepared for those who truly love [him]. The other speaks of rejoicing in heaven with all the saints. Both speak of the great hope we have as Christians that being in Christ we cannot be separated from Christ's love and so have hope of eternal life, sharing in his resurrection.

We have hope that life does not end with the death of our mortal bodies. The raising of Lazarus is one gospel event (John 11.32-44) which gives us this hope, but, of course, the resurrection of Jesus is even greater testament. Paul certainly believed, and John who wrote Revelations believed, that God has overcome death, and the time will be that we will live with God forever. .

God has given us the power of imagination to express our hope in relation to things we don't understand fully. Isaiah 25.6-9 is an apocalyptic oracle where the prophet envisages a new creation, a kingdom where all the nations of the world will be encompassed in the Lord's reign of peace. The prophecy envisages a time of plenty, where death no longer threatens, a time when God's salvation is known and experienced.

In Revelation 21.1-6a, we hear John's prophecy about the end of time when Christ's reign will come to fulfillment. Like the Isaiah vision, there is a new Jerusalem, the water of life will flow for those who are thirsty for righteousness and God will be with those who love him forever.

It is hope in Christ's victory over death which keeps us going. In a world where many are hungry, where many are suffering, where war seems endless, it is no wonder that our imaginations create a better world. In his life on earth, Jesus pointed to the possibilities—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, challenging injustice and forgiving the sinful. By ourselves we seem unable to share with justice the resources of the earth, live in peace and mutual trust, and deal unselfishly and with compassion and fairness. We are called to strive for these things, following Christ on earth, and look forward to a time of fulfillment when these come to fruition when Christ is acknowledged as Lord of All and the saints will praise him forever.

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
8th November 2009
Year B

The sentence for today (Luke 6.38) focuses our thoughts on generosity and the rewards of generosity and we can explore this through the three readings of the day.

The Book of Ruth was written partly to expose the weakness of the nationalistic prejudice at the time which banned mixed marriages, and tried to keep Israel free from outside influences. This excerpt (Ruth 3.1-5, 4.13-17) focuses on the marriage of Boaz to Ruth, a Moabite, but it is helpful to read the whole story. Ruth acted generously towards her mother-in-law, Naomi, accompanying her to a foreign land, prepared to be treated as an alien. Her actions were noticed by Boaz who generously protected her and provided for her. A kinsman who was eligible to buy a plot of land belonging to Naomi refused to do so for the transaction meant that he would also need to take the widow, Ruth. Boaz responded more generously to the situation and married Ruth. Both were rewarded with a son, Obed, who would become the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Hebrews 9.(19-22) 23-28 comments on the Jewish ritual of the Day of Atonement when the high priest symbolically cleansed the sanctuary with the blood of sacrificial animals. But sin could not be swept away like that. Only the sacrificial generosity of Christ could break down the barrier that sin created between God and man.

In Mark 12.38-44 Jesus condemned the vanity and ostentation of the religious lawyers. He praised genuine devotion and charity of the widow who gave quietly and generously of what she had, in contrast to the announcements of the wealthy when they made contributions to the Temple fund.

We are called to be generous people and this has many applications. We can be generous in welcoming refugees and aliens to our land, even so newcomers to our towns, and to our churches. We can be generous in our forgiveness of others and in all our relationships, generous in love and acts of self-giving. We can be generous with our money, not to bring attention to ourselves but because others are in need. Quiet and self-sacrificial acts of generosity will bring their own reward.

First Sunday of Advent
29th November 2009
Year C

We become dispirited when we see things wrong with the world, our society and even the Church when we have high expectations that things might get better and promises might be fulfilled. There are so many examples of this. World War1 was the war to end all wars, the United Nations promised us peace, the invasion of Iraq promised the end of terror in Iraq. The new age of scientific discovery promised science as the answer to the world's problems. These situations are somewhat similar to that of the writers of today's Old Testament and New Testament writers where hopes have not come to fulfillment.

Often in our own churches we feel disappointed that our hopes for our church in our towns have failed considerably. We fail to attract newcomers, young families are missing, people do not understand our message, many have slid away from worship, and we cannot seem to find ways to serve our communities or to speak in relevant ways.

The message of Advent is reassurance, as it was to the communities addressed by Jeremiah and Mark and Paul. God is faithful to his promises. (Jeremiah 33.14-16: waiting for salvation through the family of David; Mark 21. 25-38: waiting for the coming of the Son of Man). What do we see as promises to the Church today? The promise that Jesus will be present among us, that his Spirit will guide and counsel us, that there is forgiveness of sins, that we will be raised with Christ, that we can have life eternal... Not that we will have full churches, not that there will be plenty of money, not that we will have beautiful buildings.

The message of Advent is a summons to watch and pray. Watch for signs of the Kingdom of God, for times of love and forgiveness, for signs of hope and joy, for signs of peace. Be alert for opportunities to reach out to others, not expecting that they will always come to us. Don't get weighed down with worries about lack of numbers or disappointments, and the worries of this life, but pray for the coming of the kingdom, the fulfillment of God's will and not our own ambitions. (Luke) And grow in holiness (1 Thess.9-13) as we prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Feast of Christ the King
22nd November 2009
Year B

The people of Israel expected a Messiah for centuries. II Samuel 23.1-7 records the last words of King David who refers to the 'everlasting covenant' with the house of David. It became a theme in Jewish thought as they looked forward to the one who would fulfil the hope of Israel in the purpose of God. Psalm 132 echoes these ideas. When Jesus came, few recognized him as the Messiah. Most were looking for one who would bring in an ideal state. Peter and Martha each proclaimed Jesus as messiah; many wanted him to be the messiah, but few understood the nature of his kingdom. Pilate asked the question, 'Are you King of the Jews?' but Jesus responded with an explanation of the eternal nature of his kingdom. (John 18. 33-37)

Among Jews In New Testament times, the expectation changed from an historical figure to a cosmic king who would inaugurate a new age, a new world, to replace the existing order. There would be a sudden end to the world, the Son of Man would come in glory, there would be judgement, the faithful would be rewarded, the wicked would be punished. In this climate the Book of Revelation was written. How can we make sense of these ideas?

John's gospel shows that the believer already has eternal life, the judgment of this world is now, and perhaps the coming of the Holy Spirit is the return of Christ. We call this way of thinking 'realized eschatology'. In the other gospels too we have the paradox of the kingdom that is about to come, and yet is already present. We live with this paradox as one of the mysteries of faith. 'Christ will come again' - we still look forward to his coming in glory as a cosmic event, but individually we live knowing that Christ is already king.

We live in the face of our own end in death; we work out our judgment in our daily deeds and decisions; we try to live authentically and so lay hold of eternal life here and now. When we experience the joy, peace, love, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and hope which only Christ can give, then he reigns.

As a Christian community we believe that we experience the reign of Christ here in this world and that we can be agents of God's kingdom. Let us examine our service to others to see where we can help others experience God's reign

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
15th November 2009
Year B

Hannah, the prophet Samuel's mother, was a godly woman, whose name means grace or favour. Hannah was barren and was taunted by the first wife. But her husband Elkanah loved Hannah and favoured her. She prayed for a son and vowed to give him to the Lord as a nazirite. Her humility impressed Eli, the high priest, who gave her a blessing. God rewarded her with a son. She had found favour with God. (1 Sam 1.4-20)

Hannah's praise of God (APBA 429) shows her deep spirituality and is reminiscent of the Song of Mary. She praises God for his salvation, his judgment, his upholding of the weak, his care for the poor and hungry and his liberation of the oppressed. She has a grasp of the fact that God's ways are not our ways, and that his gracious love will rest on those whom he favours, not on those the world judges successful, wealthy or powerful.

In Advent, we hear apocalyptic readings focusing on Jesus' teaching about judgement. In Mark 13.1-11, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple and the troubles that will afflict the world and the Church before the ending of history. Judgement is a key theme of this type of writing. Jesus reassured his disciples that through all these times of trial that the Holy Spirit would be with them. "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil" was a relevant prayer for the times of persecution.

The early Church expected Christ's return and the Day of Judgement to come soon. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reassured them that Christ's sacrifice on the cross had given them forgiveness of sins. It was a once for all sacrifice, for all time, not like the animal sacrifices in the Temple. In confidence of this state of redemption what was then required of them? They had been given the confidence to approach God in faith with pure hearts. They needed to hang on to this truth and hold fast, to encourage each other in loving ways, and to meet together for mutual support. (Hebrews 10.11-14 (15-18) 19-25)

What good advice for us as we await the judgement of God! Our circumstances are different but we too face a world which is often hostile and we too need to be able to persevere in our faith, knowing that through Christ we are able to approach God. May we find God's favour in our humility, our faith and steadfastness and our perseverance, hope and encouragement.