

Sunday 3rd November 2024 – All Saint’s Day – Benefice BCP Holy Communion, Stonegrave.

As I wrote this sermon and reflected on the Gospel, I recalled nearly fifty years ago watching the Franco Zeffirelli film ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ and I remember being particularly moved by the scene when Lazarus is raised from the dead; the dramatic scenery and music and the intensity of Robert Powell portraying Jesus. As a teenager searching, it had a dramatic effect on me and my late mother and afterwards I recall going for a long walk with her in silence. The scene illustrated the point of our faith – the great victory over death that is given to us in Jesus Christ. Today on All Saints Day, we who are saints today, give thanks for the millions who have gone before who rest knowing the hope that the resurrection of Jesus brings and with it the promise of eternal life.

The fact remains, however, that death, is still a physical reality, as is the grief associated with it. The grief is usually expressed as tears, which remind us of our frailty and our humanity as tears go beyond words and speak of our need for love and our need to be re-united to God in eternal relationship. In our three readings today, there is a common occurrence – the shedding of tears. In Isaiah, we are told that there will come a day when *“the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces”*. In Revelation, we are told when God makes his home among us, He *“will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, and all things will be made new”*. I say these words at every commendation when someone is near death or has died. They are words, even though often spoken through tears, are words of triumph and hope – ‘All things new!’

In today’s gospel reading, it is Jesus himself who is in tears as are Mary and Martha and all their friends and family are too, because their beloved Lazarus has died, and Jesus had not been there to save him. Jesus saw them all weeping, and we are told he was greatly disturbed, and he wept. Jesus did not wipe away their tears or remind them of the promise in Isaiah. Not yet anyway. First, he wept with them and that makes this a very important story. The Son of God weeps and this is one of the most powerful moments in Scripture and through Him God the Father weeps too, and the Holy Spirit collects those tears and glorifies them.

Why does Jesus weep? I think that there is more behind Jesus’ tears than simply giving permission to others to grieve and even more than grief over Lazarus’ death. Jesus weeps for all who have ever died, who have succumbed to the curse that is death. In fact, I think that he is weeping that there is death in the world at all, that he is weeping for our loved ones who have died, for all will still suffer the cruel fate of death, for everyone who has had to let go of someone they love. Death, after all, is the last great enemy, and it is a terrible enemy but now a beaten one. Jesus knows this and often when these lines are translated from the original texts, He is not weeping so much out of sorrow but out of indignant anger and realises He has come to fight this enemy, and to defeat it to deliver the

central promise of the gospel, by the single most significant event in the history of our world: his resurrection from the dead and to instil the conviction in all the saints who have followed who we remember today, and our loved ones who we will remember this evening at All Souls, who join with you and I, that Jesus *was* raised from the dead, and that he *defeated* the last great enemy, death.

Jesus irrevocably demonstrated that He has power over death for us, too, when he raised Lazarus from the dead, and he promises us that one day we will all be raised. Jesus shows us this promise through the vision that Isaiah and John shared in today's readings. As we wait, with hope, our humanity still enables us to weep but now we need never give up believing that the divine risen Jesus is greater than any distress, pain, or tear. We need never give up believing that the human Jesus, who weeps with us and who weeps for us, also promises to one day wipe away every tear and that all things will be made new.

Today on All Saints Day we join with all those who have gone before us and are now in that place where all things are new, and later, at our All Souls service, we will offer prayers for our loved ones no longer with us, but for whom we trust, as we all shall, be made new too, with the assurance that death is beaten, as Jesus through his tears tells us, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Thanks be to God. Amen.