Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 3rd November 2024

Readings: *Ruth 1.1-18; Ecclesiasticus 44.1-15; Hebrews 9.11-14; Mark 12.28-34*

The fourth before Advent: All Saints

Two films and a numberless multitude

When the Church gives time to commemorating 'all saints', it is not thinking of those who have a day set aside in their honour. It's for the numberless multitude we might call 'the rest'.

Of the countless definitions of a saint, I find this one helpful: 'A saint is one who makes it easier for others to believe in God.'

Now, that doesn't say everything, because being a saint is also about being put right with God through no good works of our own but by God's 'amazing grace'. But I value this definition because it does not echo the common idea that saintliness is about being a paragon of virtue. Saints are not faultless. They are not even necessarily religious in a recognisable sense. Somehow, though, by their words and actions they give intimations of a God who is defined by wisdom and truth; by forgiveness and fruitfulness; by compassion.

They could do that by the way they embody qualities implied by the readings today.

- So, we might find saintliness in Ruth's devotion to the family into which she had married, and whose religion she had adopted. (Ruth 1) Her loyalty to her mother-in-law seems to combine her fresh understanding of Yahweh's commandments, and her tender-hearted nature.
- We might find saintliness in those who keep the two greatest commandments (Mark 12): that thorough-going love of God, and that extra-mile-going love of neighbour.
- And, reading the letter to the Hebrews, we might find saintliness in those who put their trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus. (Hebrews 9) Ruth, originally from Moab, had grown up within a religion that sacrificed in order to appease their god, Chemoth, maybe sacrificing even humans. Well, just as she adopted the different emphases in the religion of Yahweh, so Christian saints are those who have come to trust the teaching of our faith, that no sacrifice is required by us in order to satisfy God. Jesus represents the 'once and for all' expression of God's love by which we are put right with God, and are given the resources to love one another in grateful response to that God who lives and loves eternally.

Whatever else All Saints-tide offers, then, it is an opportunity for us to remember and celebrate people who've been signposts in our lives, pointing us toward truths about God. Let me pause there for a moment or three, so that we can each call to mind someone or some people who have made it easier for us to hear truth about God and take it seriously, whether or not they thought that was what they were doing.

Thinking about people like that, those saints, I find myself with two contrasting but complementary foci. The first is an appreciation of those who have died, and the second is a recognition of how we feel about their deaths, whether we are *newly* immersed in grief, or know the *lingering sorrow* of a bereavement forgotten by any save we ourselves.

First, then, our appreciation, our admiration. This morning's service began with words from the book Ecclesiasticus – 'let us now praise famous ones'. Ecclesiasticus dates from a couple of centuries before Jesus. It was originally written in Hebrew, perhaps by Ben-Sirah, and it's essentially offering theological wisdom and ethical guidance. Subsequently it was translated into Greek, some say by Ben-Sirah's grandson who was living in Alexandria among Jews speaking the local Greek language. Scholars wonder if the Greek version was specifically designed for Jews who were surrounded by experts in Greek philosophy, and particularly Stoicism, to help them hold fast the Jewish faith of the 'fathers who begat them'. (44.1b) We could probably find in Ecclesiasticus a cogent word for ourselves, living as we

do in a world that can seem to be as unfamiliar with Christianity as was ancient Alexandria. Our generation, too, needs words to encourage us to hold fast to the heritage of Christian faith, and to understand the ethical imperatives our religion urges.

In the forty-fourth chapter, the writer praises those 'famous' ones - those who live by the faith and virtues he's been advocating through the earlier chapters. You might recall the opening scene of the 1981 film, *Chariots of Fire*, about the Paris Olympics of 1924. The first few moments are at the 1978 memorial service for Harold Abrahams, the athlete hero of the film. The eulogy is offered by teammate, Lord Andrew Lindsay, a fictional character based upon the life of Lord Burley. In Lindsay's tribute he uses that same verse as it is in the King James Version, 'Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.' (44.1)

Some of those we might want to recall today could be famous, having made a name for themselves by valour, by intelligence, or by creativity, such as Gabriel Fauré's – the sort of thing the writer has in mind. Not all of us *rub shoulders* with famous ones, but such is today's media, we can be aware of, even feel we 'know' such luminaries. That recent stay in South Africa, troubled by division as it still is, alerted me to the veneration in which Nelson Mandela is held, across the colour spectrum. As Ecclesiasticus has it, he and many others have 'left behind a name, … others declare their praise.' (44.8)

But not everyone we think about in All Saints-tide is famous; it could be none of them are. They might be what our opening words called, 'unlikely saints'. Ben Sirah realises that. 'Of others', he writes, 'there is no memory, … [it's] as though they never existed.' (44.9) No memory, except ours, our memory of a cherished child, a beloved parent, respected teacher, or a deeply wanted friend. They are the ones who matter to us - profoundly matter. John Eppel, a Zimbabwean novelist, recently published an autobiographical book. [1] A reviewer, somewhat sneeringly, observes how little of note there is in this account of Eppel's life, even though he was Southern Rhodesia-born, lived through the heady days leading up to Zimbabwe's independence, and has remained there throughout the post-colonial era, with all its potential and trauma. In conclusion, though, the reviewer relaxes his critique of Eppel's apparently uneventful journey, coming to see that 'a life well-lived should not *have* to be a spectacle.' [2]

This mix of the famed and the ordinary whom we call to mind in All Saints-tide was set in sharp relief in South Africa, as I revisited some people and places to which I had not been for thirty years. You can imagine how many 'saints' have died since we left. Some of them were seriously famous, including President Mandela, and I also paused silently in Cape Town's Anglican Cathedral, where the ashes of Desmond Tutu are interred. The famous.

But many of our fellow church members and colleagues have died, too. Among them is Julia Racheku, the Motswana person who worked with Bethan and me in our home, carrying our infant daughter on her back as she went about her tasks, keeping her safe, bonding with her. Julia was ever so ordinary, but not to us, and even less so to Jess.

So it is that in this season we recall those whose memory we cherish, whoever they are, whatever sort of a saint they have been, however they have helped us to see, to grasp something about God.

We recall their legacy, their gifts and graces, anecdotes that make us smile, or wince. And yes, we recall the stuff we regret, too - stuff we wish wasn't part of the story we shared with them. And we recall *all* that, in this safe space where memory is washed by the forgiveness with which God bathes all who come to the living water of divine grace, as it is offered to us through Jesus Christ.

And so to my second point. Even as we honour famous and ordinary ones - precisely *because* we are remembering them - we might be sad, or at least momentarily sobered. And if indeed that is how this leaves us feeling and we would like someone to speak with, to pray with, then there is the opportunity to do so after the service at the back of the church. But, you see, feeling that sadness, there is nothing

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[1] Eppel, John 2023 *A Colonial Boy: sketches of my life before Zimbabwean Independence, 1950-1980* Pigeon Books
[2] Dube, Nhlanhla 2024 The Conversation, 17th October 2024 Available at https://theconversation.com/colonial-white-boys-in-zimbabwe-john-eppels-autobiography-is-a-welcome-book-but-a-difficult-read-239356; accessed 26th October 2024

that contradicts our Christian faith. In Acts, Stephen boldly preaches about Jesus, and how he was slain by his opponents; that sacrificial death of which Hebrews is writing. Stephen doesn't hold back in his criticism of those who did that: 'You stiff necked people … opposing the Holy Spirit', he rails. For this outspoken critique *he* is then stoned to death. (7.58-60) And because of his death, his friends are heartsore. Acts records, 'Godly ones buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.' (8.2)

You see, grief and sadness are normal, logical elements of relationship. In the 1993 film, *Shadowlands*, as Joy, his wife, is dying of cancer, C. S. Lewis says, 'The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal.' The grief of bereavement is not a pain by which we should be surprised, any more than love's joy surprises us. But nor is grief a pain we should ignore or neglect, for if we do ignore it, if we try to pretend it's not there, that we are too grown up, too Christian for grief, it can become its own cancer, carcinogenically eating away at our own life. Rather, the person of faith, mourning deeply, echoes the psalm writers by expressing their lament, maybe crying out like Jesus, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (22.1) Only with such candid cries can our lament do its work of excising the pain. As one Covid-widow has written, 'the path toward healing is lament' for in our candid lamentation 'God sings a louder song than suffering ever could, a song of 'renewal and restoration'. [3] This widow witnesses that it's OK to grieve; it's how God heals.

And finally, the Christians' witness – both as we rejoice in lives well lived (or perhaps not very well lived), be they 'spectacles' or not *and* as we lament their passing - the Christians' witness is of resurrection. It is Jesus' word to us, just as it was to Martha and Mary when Lazarus, their brother, died. '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.' (John 11.25) Of course, we all know so well that death is beyond our experience. We wouldn't be sitting here if we had already died. That's why, when we speak of it, we can only make hesitant, faltering, tentative attempts 'to recall the mystery of faith, which connects the mortality of life as we know it, with the miracle of life as [we are promised we] *shall* know it'. [4]

Central to that 'mystery of faith' though is the empty tomb as a fantastic sign that that death is not the end. And I use 'fantastic' in a literal sense, given its Greek roots of 'to make visible' or 'to show'. [5] For Christians, the resurrection of Jesus 'shows' us that beyond our own grave, we, like him, are held by a love that death cannot defeat. As the Song of Solomon has it, 'Love is stronger than death'. (8.6) Many who are bereaved of people they treasure *know* that. Our love doesn't go just because they have gone. That is why, at one and the same time, we can rejoice in the treasury of memories we have, and lament the continual emptiness we feel, trusting that God's resurrection song is louder than any of our laments.

As George Herbert's version of Psalm 23 puts it: 'Yea, in death's shady black abode well may I walk, not fear: for you are with me; [with] your rod to guide, [and] your staff to bear.'

May it be so, and thanks be to God for every saint who makes it easier for us to believe any of that, in the name of Christ. Amen

N. P. Uden

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[3] Petersen, Heidi, 2024 in *40 Days: time with God* by Pat Baxter and Noelene Curry, Wandsbeck, South Arica: Reach Publishers pages 42f

[4] Ellis, Christopher J. and Myra Blyth 2005 *Gathering for Worship: patterns and prayers for the community of disciples* Norwich: Canterbury Press page 249

[5] From *phantazein*, to make visible, cf *phainein*, to show