

All Saints' Day - 1 November 2009 - All Saints B  
Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44  
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It needs to be said: All Saints' Day is more than the day that follows Halloween. In fact, in ages past, Halloween was known as the day that comes before All Saints' Day. All Saints' Day is a day of remembering and celebrating people of faith, known and unknown. It is a way of honoring the dead, and also, it must be said, of comforting ourselves still living that the lives of our loved ones now gone, and our own lives, have led somewhere, are leading to something, that they matter.

Toward that end, I'll share with you some thoughts that have occurred to me persuasively over the years. No one gets out of here alive. We all are terminal. Both our mortality and our immortality are gifts from God. We live in heaven in the life of age to come only when we live in heaven in the here and now.

It is All Saints Day and when we, as Christians do, speak about the saints of God who have gone before, we do well to keep in mind that people around us hear us talking about heaven as a location that can be found on a map or with a really good GPS. It suggests to people that heaven has boundaries. And pretty soon, people suppose that God must have boundaries, too. So, when people find their lives complicated by their own mistakes by their own sinfulness and by the sins of others, they can assume that there's no way that such a wonderful place like heaven could possibly be nearby; that such a loving and holy being as God would ever stop by their place.

"The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God." That's what the scripture says. Solomon the great King of Israel, the wisest sovereign ever known, was once asked by God, "What would you like from me; just name it." I think about what I might do if ever God were to ask me that question. What would you ask? All the urgent stuff comes to mind pretty quickly: bills that need to be paid; illness that needs to be cured; arguments that need to be won. Hopefully, though, before I spoke, I would think about it longer, and listen to the things behind the urgencies.

That's what Solomon does when God asks him. And Solomon asks then for nothing more than wisdom to be a good leader of God's people and a good servant of God. And God grants his prayer. When you or I hear from the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon, then, we can know that we are hearing really wise things.

"The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God." Part of the wisdom in this is found in what it does *not* say. Solomon does not write that the souls of the righteous *will be* in the hands of God. Being in the hands of God is not something that happens later on, somewhere down the line, and in a different place. It isn't something that happens in the past, either. It is not the case that the souls of the righteous *were*, at one time, in God's hands, but then circumstances changed, things got difficult, they suffered disappointments in school, in job, in marriage, family, friends, and clearly they were no longer in God's hands. Neither is being in God's hands just a fond memory of the 'good old days,' a memory that we can spend time with only when we have the time to spend.

"The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God." This is wisdom for right now, because it is true right now. It is true at this very moment, and in this very place. And what makes the righteous righteous is not wisdom, with all due respect to Solomon. The righteous are not the accomplished, not the famous, not the influential. The righteous are the folks who trust in God. More accurately, they trust God. When we trust 'in' something or 'in' someone, it's usually for a particular purpose. The righteous are folks who simply trust God because God is utter trustworthy. Sometimes there is a goal involved, but more often there is not.

We are remembering today our loved ones who have died and gone before. There is not a goal involved. It is simply that case that we loved them and have not ceased to do so: mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, relatives, lovers, and friends.

We remember also those known to us only through history and tradition. They are figures of great example who labored for the Love of God and for the cause of justice and mercy. The Church notes them in its calendar and commends their stories to us as occasion of worship to God; for the way God moved in their lives, and to ask that God move within our own lives in ways that might inspire the people around us today or those will follow after we are gone. You can find these folks listed in the calendar in the front pages of the Prayer Book. You can go a wall calendar of the Church year or to the Church calendar online and find still more saints whose names have been added in recent years.

There are lots of saints in the Church. They may have their own day officially designated for collectively remembering them, or they may have a day and a memory known mostly or only to you or me. In either case, they have someone who still loves them. And the main thing is they and we are in the hand of God and will remain there.

Jesus comes to the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And he is sad. He knows, does he not, that his friend who has died is going to rise from the grave? But Jesus is sad. And I think this must be because, first, Jesus is so thoroughly and fully human. God incarnate, God in the flesh, fully God and fully man, we understand the terms intellectually, at least a little bit. But at such a time as this that we get a rare insight into what it means for Jesus.

Someone whom he loves is dead. And this hurts. People whom he loves are hurting because their brother is dead. And this, too, hurts Jesus. Lazarus was Jesus' friend. He probably gave Jesus encouragement in life and inspiration; that's what friends and loved ones do. Jesus knows that he will, in a moment restore Lazarus to life. But that doesn't matter right now. Right now, in this moment Lazarus is dead, and it hurts. The human reality is that when someone we love has died it hurts.

'For the sake of the people,' Jesus says; so that they may trust God and know that Jesus is the one whom God has sent, Jesus raises Lazarus from death. It is a powerful sign, and it persuades the enemies of Jesus' gospel that they'd better get rid of Jesus right away

before everybody else turns to him and they find their own prestige and influence all but gone.

But let's think about it. Lazarus is alive again, yes; but doesn't this mean that he is simply continuing to grow older? Isn't he still going to get hungry in the afternoon? Isn't he still going to get cold at night? Isn't he still going to scrape his knee or stub his toe? Isn't he still, one day, sooner or later, going to die again? We know the answer: we know that he is going to die; because we know that no one gets out of here alive. We know that we all are terminal.

However, as the writer of the Revelation recalls, God own voice calls declares it: "The home of God is among mortals." Jesus has restored Lazarus to the morality of life, to show the people then, that God is with them; to show you and me who follow afterward, that God' is with us, too. It matters because it shows us, it teaches us, that our mortality is a gift equal to the gift of our immortality. God doesn't put us here to rehearse for heaven. God doesn't give us mortal life as a lesser contrast to life eternal.

God is with us now, not just at some time beyond the future nor only after we have died to life in this age. God is with us now here in this life, in this world, in this place, in all the places that our mortal trust of God takes us. Even now, God "is making all things new." God isn't waiting, and God isn't asking us to wait, either.

It is a lesson worth learning again for the sake of the saints living all around us, now, and for those will follow afterward. In every age, all the saints of God are signs of assurance that we will be together with those who have loved us, and those whom we have loved; because knowing them and loving them in the life of *this* age makes this the time and place when our life in heaven begins.

So may Almighty God, who holds all souls in life, grant that we, following the good examples of those who have served and have gone before, may also enter with them into eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.