

All Saints Day 2018

Here is the good news, from all three readings this morning. You were not made to die. You, whoever you are, with everything about you which feels weak and unimpressive and failing – your body, your mind, your morals – you were not made to die. The Gospel is that you are astoundingly precious. That you are a beloved child of God, and that because of Jesus, and his Cross and Resurrection, you are destined for what St. Paul calls in Romans 8 the glorious liberty of the children of God. You will be free from everything that holds you back and makes you small, everything that is miserable. You are going to be an astonishing sunburst of love, and joy, and beauty, such as you can barely imagine now. In the words of this morning's anthem, you will be unfading splendour.

I think we tend to downplay that aspect of our faith. We find it much easier to talk about what our faith means for the here and now, about how it relates to how we feel *now*, or should behave *now*, or work for society *now*. And of course, that is good and proper. We do indeed believe in life *before* death, and how you live it and how you make it possible for others is really, really important.

But... if you believe the Bible, life before death is just the prelude. Just the opening bars of a great symphony which we have not yet heard. Each one of us here, even the very, very oldest, is in the eyes of the New Testament just a babe. Not even a babe, a mere seed. We have *all* not really begun. Each one of us has a destiny far beyond what this world, this life can possibly produce. Even if we organised this world perfectly, even if we each individually lived this life perfectly ... we were made for something more than this, and because of Jesus of Nazareth we will get there.

That's really what the feast of All Saints is about. It's telling us that people just like you and me – Alban, Lawrence, all the rest of them, people just like you and me – have entered into the glory. They are alive. At the eucharist we don't just remember them, we don't just honour them: we join with them. At every eucharist Alban, Lawrence, Mary, all of them, are with us too. They're singing to God with us, and as one of the most wonderful bits of the New Testament says, Hebrews 11, they're waiting for us. Waiting for us to arrive with them, because only when we do shall they be made perfect. All Saints: we belong together in glory, one perfect union of love.

Why do we neglect it? Why do we find it easier to talk about now, and underplay our destiny? All sorts of reasons.

Maybe it's our imagery of heaven – maybe all that talk of clouds and harps and white dresses, or even of favourite childhood pets and family reunions – maybe it all just seems a bit too sentimental. Lovely, but not really worthy of grown-ups.

Maybe we know how easily talk of heaven becomes a substitute for doing anything to change things on earth, how the poor and oppressed get fobbed off with the promise of 'pie-in-the-sky' when you die.

I suspect though one of the deepest reasons is that we're very, very much aware quite simply of how many human beings have lived and died in history. The thought of all of them, billions and billions of them, somehow being alive, being special, being precious just seems impossible. They have fizzed up from nothing, they have lived, they have died, they have vanished. How *can* any of them really matter, matter for eternity? We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep: in the end, we just melt back into air, thin air.

That sounds very, very plausible, grown up, and mature. From the Christian point of view, it is however totally false. We can't *prove* it's false. Proving what lies beyond death is simply impossible. But we can say two things.

First, it really matters that people matter, that we are not just bubbles that rise one moment and burst the next. If, instead, we are what Stephen Hawking said - 'mere chemical scum on a moderate size planet, orbiting round a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a billion galaxies' - then why not treat people just like that, like scum? *Why* should we love our neighbours as ourselves? The Christian answer is clear where the secular one is not: we love our neighbour because he or she is a beloved child of God and bound for an awesome destiny. Their dignity does not depend on their usefulness, or their power, or their achievement: it is theirs from their very first heartbeat, because they are God's child.

Secondly, we believe that people matter, and matter for eternity, not just because the alternative is grim but because of Jesus of Nazareth. He spent his life teaching and showing what it meant to be God's child, and to treat others as God's children. He lived out God's ambitions for the human race: he was the great Yes to all God wanted. And when the Romans crucified him, they were enacting the great 'no.' They were saying, this is not God's child. This is a slave, this is a worthless thing, this is scum: and so we can whip it, and nail it up, and kill it. We can do what we like, because people are not special, not beautiful, not loved from eternity: they are meat for the butchering. Jesus was God's yes; the Cross was Rome's no. Humanity's no. God creates, we crucify.

But the Gospel is that God is greater than us. Crucifixion is not as strong as creation. The resurrection of Jesus shows that not even our very worst, our darkest hate, our most extreme violence, can stop God from doing what he made us for: bringing the human person to glory, making them shine with joy and love and beauty beyond imagining, making them resurrection. It has happened in Jesus, and the whole point of the Gospel is that what happens in him first, happens in us next. All of us, in Him, are on the way to glory.

And if you think that that is all very well, but wonder what you're actually meant to do with it, let me end with one of my very favourite C.S. Lewis quotations. This came at the end of a sermon where he had been saying – much better than me – the sort of thing I've been trying to say this morning:

“It may be asked what practical use there is in the speculations which I have been indulging. I can think of at least one such use. It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden, of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature, which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other towards one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection due to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with each other, all friendship, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit – immortal horrors, or everlasting splendours.”

You have never talked to a mere mortal. This All Saints Day, let us vow to help each other towards our destiny. Towards everlasting, unfading splendour.

Peter Waddell