

No matter how tough it gets ...

The occasion of All Saints' Day is one of the oldest commemorations in Christian Church history. Common and part of life particularly among the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches, it is relatively unknown in the other traditions and Lutherans find themselves drawn to it and other church festivals, the more, I think, we see ourselves as not just beginning in the 16th century but as part of the 'communion of saints' we confess in the Apostles' Creed. That phrase in the Creed is subject to a number of views as we seek to explain the boundaries and actions of a 'communion of saints' – not the least of which is whether being dead counts. GK Chesterton pointed out, "Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father."¹

The Lutheran reformers objected in the 16th century to the cult of the saints in which saints were invoked and sought for help but taught rather "that saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith" (CAXXI).

Such are the practical, the this-world realities of what to do, how to deal with, the reality of death in a relationship with the man who has defeated death. Death still pulls apart the living from each other in this world. Here in this world death is the master who may be cheated, who may be slowed, but so far will always win. Our experience of this world is one of mortality – fleeting – memorialised in words or deeds, if remembered at all, but never by our living presence. People are leaving digital messages for loved ones to be replayed when the bereaved want to hear them and while we can imagine some comfort in doing so, we can also imagine how grief and pain might remain heightened rather than slowly becoming incorporated in the ongoing living. Our senses tell us that death is the final enemy and cannot be defeated. The grave is final.

Today's commemoration is the Christian Church's response to this message. The empty tomb of Jesus remains paramount. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians that if Jesus hasn't been raised to life again, Christians are to be the most pitied for death truly rules (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). But Jesus' resurrection – his words and presence with his disciples for 40 days – his 'Peace be with you' – gives another message in the face of death – that whether we live or whether we die the Christian is with the Lord (Romans 14:8). Now the question becomes simply, 'Who are you going to believe? Your senses and experience that tell you death is final or Jesus who claims to be the resurrection and the life and those who die in him live?'

If all deaths were 'equal' – that is, if everyone died after a long and prosperous life – then I can imagine people being quite comfortable with a Jesus' ending. But death doesn't play fair – doesn't wait – attacks at whim – creates havoc and pain so quickly and unexpectedly – that it challenges Jesus' and God's claims of care and support in this world which then minimises life after death to a 'so what?' for those left behind. Death challenges God's credentials of goodness. All religions are susceptible here but Christianity especially so because of its emphasis on the love of God and his mercy in Jesus.

So recently I've come across accounts of Christians who have been so shaken and shocked by death that their response is one of bitterness and anger. We expect to bury our parents not our children but when we do there can be deep rage by the bereaved. Most clergy have experienced such anger and hostility as God's

¹ G K Chesterton (1908). *Orthodoxy* (Ch 4. The Ethics of Elfland)

representatives and sadly most congregations can tell accounts of people who no longer worship because of their anger and grief. So let me get this right ...

You're angry with God because your son, daughter, baby, grandchild died? Yes!

Which God are you angry with?

God!

He has a name. There are many religions in the world all claiming to present God. Which one are you angry with?

God! The one in heaven – the one who sent Jesus.

So you're angry with the Christian God?

Yes. He doesn't love and he doesn't care otherwise my child wouldn't have suffered and died!

Let me get this right. Out of all the gods on this planet you're angry because your child died with the one whose Son died on a cross so that your child might live forever?

What should be said next?

We've entered the area of personal hells and sadness and grief and loneliness. There aren't pat answers that can be wrapped with a nice ribbon and bow and handed out. That doesn't work. All I can do is point back to the cross and by the light of an empty tomb tell the story of that man, Jesus, and declare that he isn't our genie to do our will but our God who seeks his will be done because he is committed to us in this world of sin and death and that will is the best for us. The 3rd petition of the Lord's Prayer – Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven – is, for me, the scariest request to make to God – but the prayer concludes with the 7th Petition – Deliver us from evil – and that is what Jesus' cross and empty tomb guarantee.

Death and grief can leave us so emotionally raw that it can be hard to believe and trust just words. We want so much more – not the least is our loved one back for while more. But words can remain with us – they speak into all emotions – and so the scene in Revelation 7 of the white robed saints gives us a picture of worship and God's glory and no more tears, pain, suffering or death. Jesus' words on the mountainside promises that those who mourn will be comforted – not with the hollow words of ignorance or platitudes arising from fear – but with the truth which sets us free to grieve but with hope.

And today we have heard a psalm that frankly seems strange with its talk of praise, singing, rejoicing, dancing, being lifted up by God, saved by God and then it continues on talking about swords, vengeance, punishments, chains and judgements! (I've printed it in the worship bulletin.)

Praise the Lord!

Sing to the Lord a new song,

his praise in the assembly of the godly!

Let Israel be glad in his Maker;

let the children of Zion rejoice in their King!

Let them praise his name with dancing,

making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!

For the Lord takes pleasure in his people;

he adorns the humble with salvation.

Let the godly exult in glory;

let them sing for joy on their beds.

Let the high praises of God be in their throats

and two-edged swords in their hands,

to execute vengeance on the nations

and punishments on the peoples,

to bind their kings with chains

and their nobles with fetters of iron,
to execute on them the judgment written!
This is honour for all his godly ones.
Praise the Lord! (Psalm 149 ESV)

This psalm refers to either the return from exile when the Jews rebuilt Jerusalem in the face of opposition – recall the book of Nehemiah and the working with trowel in one hand and sword in the other so to speak – or it refers to the Maccabean times of revolt against the Seleucids. It has been misused in seeking vengeance in God's name – Thomas Müntzer in the Peasants' Revolt and it was the battle cry of the Roman Catholic Church in the Thirty Years War.

The psalm begins with a call to praise by the congregation to God who has saved them. They can dance and make melody and rejoice even at home – sing for joy in their beds – because God has saved them. What is interesting is that the praise of God isn't peace on earth – the soldiers need to be ready to defend if attacked. This salvation in terms of restoring the people of Israel is also a judgment on those who have enslaved and captured God's people. Just as God has saved his people so it is ultimately God who executes judgement on the enemies of his people.

I can't find any history for when and why this psalm is linked to today's commemoration. The best I can work out is that it is a modern thing – possibly the last 50 years and tied to the 3 year lectionary. And it is used today on All Saints Day to recognise that when we talk about death, we talk about fighting it – not giving up – death is the enemy. No matter how we fight it – how we're armed – and this world is a battleground between life and death – our weapons will not vanquish this foe – but God has done so. We use violence in this world and all it does really is increase fear, violence, and death. God allows violence to be done on his Son and the outcome is still violence in this world – such is the way of the world – but now it does not have to cause more fear, more violence, and more death for Jesus has replaced those worldly responses with love, service, and life. No wonder Jesus once said of his disciples that they were like sheep in the midst of wolves (Matthew 10:16). No wonder the Early Church grew with the deaths of so many martyrs in those first centuries. Paul told the Corinthians that the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Of course all I've just done is spout more words and the dead are still dead to the living but not to the Living One, to Jesus who has risen from the dead and lives forever. This side of eternity we still live in a world of swords and violence but we seek always to not live as the world lives. On the other side of eternity those in Christ – yes, they have died – praise the Lord and sing a new song. Such is the communion of saints – all the saints – All Saints – bonded and linked through Jesus Christ who doesn't abandon his people in their dying or in their grief – or any other day for that matter – no matter how tough things are.