**#34 All Saints 31.10.21L Rev. Richard Sandland**

**All Saints Patronal; All Saints Day**

**Wisdom 3: 1-9**

**Revelation 21: 1-6a**

**(Psalm 24)**

**John 11: 32-44**

What is it that constitutes a saintly act, an act that we are sure issues from a saint? How do we distinguish between the saintly and the merely very good and holy? And, importantly, who decides – what are their determinants?

On the face of it, the *least* saintly activities we hear of today are those of Jesus, reported by John. Miraculous, yes, and profoundly significant, not least for Lazarus, but are they the actions of a saint, and are they performed in the way we expect a saint to act? Not for the first time, Jesus is publicly exhibiting the *human* quality that he foregrounds from the start, the quality that distinguishes his ministry from almost all of that which has gone before – *unequivocal* love. Saints seem to perform many of their acts through love of Jesus – which is fair enough – but here we see Jesus’s love travelling in the other direction.

Jesus loved Lazarus; of course, he loves Mary and Martha too, there seems to be some special, almost private, love in these relationships, but there seems to be a *particular* love for Lazarus. We see parallels in the method of their burial, in caves sealed by stones which are rolled away, by persons known or unknown; also in a shared act of resurrection, of course; some say that Lazarus’s -revival, shall we call it? - preshadows Jesus’s resurrection. And yet, despite this closeness, we can wonder about the nearby riddle of John’s Gospel, where Jesus *knows* Lazarus is unwell and *yet* *delays* his journey, leading to Mary’s admonishment to him at the start of our reading. That delay causes grief – not least to Jesus himself who we see being ‘greatly disturbed… and visibly moved.’ ‘Jesus began to weep’, we are told – just think about that for a moment; *Jesus* began to weep. The Word, who was there in the beginning, and through whom came ‘the life that was the light of all the people’ began to weep. If every anyone doubted that Jesus was fully divine and fully human, this story should convince us otherwise. But are his actions in this reading those of what we call a saint?

We shall return to Jesus.

What, then, *is* expected of our saints? Solomon’s wisdom gives us a hint; are these people who are ‘tested and found worthy; they are tried in the furnace,’ people who ’shine forth and...run like sparks through the stubble;’ they will ‘govern nations and rule over people’. Sainthood seems, in this admittedly brief and contextless part of Solomon, to be bound up with power, power being granted after showing themselves worthy. Psalm 24, also set for today, tends towards other qualities; the righteous will have ‘clean hands and a pure heart, not sworn to falsehood’. For this, they will receive ‘a *just reward* from God.’ The movement of the saints seems often upwards, away from us, to be at the right hand of God, a place with the immortals; set apart, in some way, as exemplary.

I have nothing but admiration for saints; admiration, but perhaps, not love, specifically; it seems to me that what marks a saint out is their actions, all of which I, and many of us, would struggle to copy. Sainthood involves sacrificial acts, a Philippian humbling of oneself and often pain, misery, utter grief. But I would question some of the power structures, leading to the action and reward dualisms that we see exemplified as prerequisites of saintliness. I don’t wish a saint to suffer as an example for me, and I’ve never met a God who requires pain in this way. So we have to ask where does that demand come from – who sets the conditions necessary to become a saint?

It seems the case that this often retrospective award of sainthood is a human construct imposed onto actions that some people have previously taken; so exemplary, yes, but for whom? As I said, I don’t wish anyone to suffer to be made an example for me…and so, in this power dynamic that *I think* I see, where I wonder if both church and state to be complicit in the attribution of sainthood for political and social reasons, what I truly *don’t* see is God’s grace.

Grace is much misunderstood – so much so that my suspicious mind can only wonder if this is the case wilfully. Because God’s grace is pretty simple, and is absolutely beautiful; it is the unconditional, freely given, undeserved, love of God. It has no cost to the receiver, but as we see on Calvary, it can have a cost to the giver; the moment there is a cost to the receiver, then it’s simply not grace any more; it’s some sort of transaction. In our binary, cost/benefit driven world, its probably no wonder that its misunderstood; but for me, that misunderstanding compromises the notion of sainthood, and certainly of the grace with which sainthood should be imbued.

As we saw earlier, the movement of saints is upwards, away from you and me, towards a place in heaven; but what of John of Patmos, in Revelation? He says, ‘...the place of God is *among mortals*. He will dwell with them…’ ‘I am making all things new’, - Revelatory indeed; The lamb of God, it seems, *reverses* the direction of travel of saintly grace, through His emphasis and primacy of human love, and in doing so restores grace to its rightful place in our world; saintly are people who help the lamb to ‘wipe every tear’ from *our* eyes; they don’t writhe in pain for us, remotely; they are alongside us, sharing grace and rejoicing in the Lamb. Perhaps its *our* realisation of this that might make The Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end say, finally ‘it is done;’ they get it at last. Saints act here on earth – as I think Christian Aid said a few years ago, ‘we believe in life *before* death.’

What I’m *not* doing here is any iota of denigration of the saints; what I am suggesting is that our reception and what we take from our saints should, rather, be the un-saintlike actions of Jesus in John; I abandoned him earlier on, as he never will me, to make other points, but it seems to me now that his actions with Lazarus are bound up with grace, with love, with actions here amongst us, without any expectation of reward or recognition – truly gracious acts. So what I’m suggesting is that the life of Jesus transcends human constructs of what sainthood is, begging the question, how are we to identify what it is to be a saint, and therefore, who might be identified as such.

Over the last few days, I’ve been reading a fascinating book called ‘Edgewise’[[1]](#footnote-1); it’s a volume of the experiences of Anglican lay women over the last 30 years, the experiences they have has since women were ‘allowed’ to be ordained; what has it been like to be, in effect, now a double minority in the COFE – a woman and *not* ordained? This resonates because as I look out here at All Saints on this, our special day, I can’t but wonder at the grace given by all the Anglican lay women I see before me, over far more years that I’ve had a collar, or even an inkling towards a collar. Its people like you that make me ask, ‘how do we define saints’? Who’s excluded and why? As Helen Stanton says, ‘We are *all* gatekeepers.’

May we be generous in our recognition of the saints amongst us – whatever we’re allowed to call them.

May we be prophetic in thinking about our scriptures and what they tell us, what they ask of us.

May we be gracious in recognition of the contribution of our Anglican lay women; may their discipleship be acknowledged as front -and-centre, not *Edgewise*.

And may we rejoice in and continue to wrestle with the complexity of all of our theologies, offering them all back to God in worship and praise.

And may we all be blessed, in All Saints.

Amen

1. Ed. Hannah Ward & Jennifer Wild*, Edgewise? Experiences of some Anglican lay women* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2021)

<https://dartonlongmantodd.co.uk/titles/2326-9781913657260-edgewise> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)