

November 8 - All Souls' Day (transferred) Sermon notes

Wisdom 3:1-9, Psalm 116:1-8, 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 6:37-40

In the place of the readings for the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost I have made the decision to focus our attention on the celebration of All Souls' Day. I did this, in part, in recognition of Remembrance Day which occurs in the middle of the week to come. I also made this choice because All Souls' Day deals with the subject of grief and you and I have been in grief for the past number of months whether we realize it or not. We tend to think of grief having to do only with the death of a loved one but those who counsel grieving people let us know that grief happens whenever a significant loss is experienced in life. The loss of a job, the loss of health, the loss of freedom are all things that can bring up the same kind of feelings and symptoms that the death of a loved one brings. So I felt that the observance of All Souls' Day is appropriate for a number of reasons and I invite you to explore with me some of the things we learn from the scripture passages appointed for this day. In his book "What Shall We Say?" the Rev. Tom Long points out 4 truths that impact this meditation on grief which are: "There is a God, God is all powerful, God is powerful and good, There is innocent suffering." (page 23) I have found it to be helpful to allow scripture to inform my own thoughts on these four points as I deal with the losses I have experienced over my life so I begin with the Gospel passage we just heard.

The event described in John's Gospel takes place after the feeding of a large crowd of people with a few meagre morsels. Jesus has just finished saying, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe." (John 6:35-6) The fact that there is a God is not challenged all that often but the identity of that God is often misunderstood. Jesus had just presided at a meal made from 5 barley loaves and two fish which fed about 5,000 people. This 'food from heaven' was meant to remind people of the way in which the God of their ancestors had fed the multitude in the wilderness as they journeyed from Egypt to the promised land. This reassurance of God's provision helped those ancient Israelites on their journey and Jesus was offering the same kind of relationship and yet some of those who had witnessed this message did not believe. Jesus then gives further reassurance that the care and protection of God's people is not dependant on their belief but on the faithfulness of God. "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away....and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day." (6:37,39,40) There is a God, God is all powerful, God is powerful and good, and there is innocent suffering. In the midst of all that was going on in those days in Palestine Jesus offers some hope in the midst of the suffering that was going on.

As we grieve it is important to remember that the faithfulness of God is solid and real and that God is good as well as being powerful. Sometimes the circumstances in which we live seem to contradict that idea but when we ‘step back’ we can once again see the reality of the loving arms of God wrapping themselves around us. The hope that is meant to be born in us comes from the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ. St. Peter, when writing to people who had been driven out of their homes because of persecution, reminded his readers that: ‘By his (God’s) great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.’ (1 Peter 1:3–5) This wonderful sentence is jammed packed with promise as well as the assurance that God has not abandoned his people. There is a new birth into a living hope that is provided by the Creator of all. This new birth is assured, guaranteed, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This inheritance will not perish, it will not become defiled in any way, it will never fade, and it is being preserved for us. Not only that God’s people are being protected in such a way that the salvation promised will not be lost. This promise sounds similar to the one spoken by Jesus about not losing any that have been entrusted to him. While this promise does not wipe out the pain of suffering or prevent grief from happening it holds out hope for a better day to come and companionship as the journey takes place.

One of the most difficult parts of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the interruption of our social circles. Some of them have been restored to a degree through the use of social media platforms, telephone calls and letters but some are still in tatters. Companionship on the journey is one of the more important things which help us cope with disaster, grief, and pain. It is sometimes difficult to restore those connections and learn to appreciate them in this new order - it sometimes feels easier to just mourn the loss - but when that difficulty is overcome new opportunities to experience companionship on the journey emerge. The same is true of the companionship of God. Many people have some familiar practices in which they experience the love of God and God’s presence. In this time of isolation some of those are not possible and so new ones have to be developed. These practices will not feel comfortable at first and it is perfectly fine to continue to lament the loss of the ‘old way’ but eventually we may discover new and exciting ways of feeling the presence of God and when we do we will re-discover the hope that is preserved for us. We can help one another find that path by gathering for worship, praying diligently for each other, and reaching out in whatever way we can to members of our community in order to remind each other of these promises.

We come now to the passage from Wisdom. First of all if you can’t find this book in your Bible

that is because it belongs to a set of readings called the Apocrypha which are not included in all publications of the Bible. These are books that were not endorsed by the various councils, particularly those in the Protestant world, and so they are not deemed to be authoritative. At the time of the English Reformation it was observed “And the other books the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine...” (Article VI of the 39 Articles) We read this passage, which was likely written shortly before Jesus was born, as advice and further reassurance. The opening line of the passage has brought comfort to many: ‘***But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them***’. (Wisdom 3:1) As we grieve the death of a loved one it can bring us comfort to know that the essence of who they are is being kept safe in the hands of God. While we don’t have any real details about what happens after we die there is enough to conclude that something of who we are is preserved by God awaiting the day of general resurrection. The same God who made the promises to us as heard in the first two scripture passages we have looked at is the one who also promises to care for all of God’s children until the day of resurrection and beyond. The writer of this particular passage assures the reader that ‘no torment will ever touch them’ Regardless of how the person died or what sort of life that person lived the essence of who they are is being kept safe and unaffected by time by the strong hands of our Creator. We are urged to leave it to God to determine who are righteous and who are not while we take comfort from his promise to care and protect. That which is important, essential, precious, will be cared for in those who have died and in those of us who remain alive. The Covid-19 virus has radically altered our lives and causes grief and suffering but it is not powerful enough to overthrow what God is doing to restore all things in Christ. The ‘souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and no torment will ever touch them’ means that we can leave those losses we have experienced in the hands of God and work on receiving from God the strength and the hope that is offered to us through a living and loving relationship with God.

There is a God, God is powerful, God is powerful and good, innocent’s suffering is real. At the same time this God who walks alongside us through the power of the Holy Spirit brings hope, resilience, and strength. As we remember the lives of those who have died from this parish family over the past year or so and remember with thanksgiving those of our loved ones who have died let us renew our hearts and minds by the good news that our loved ones are in God’s care and we are offered the healing breath of God so that we can continue in this journey sharing in that love and spreading that love into the lives of those we meet.