

Sermon for the All Souls 2020.

Wisdom 3:1-9. 1 Corinthians 15:51-57. Psalm 130.
John 11:21-27.

The Collect: Lord, the Maker and Redeemer of all believers: grant to the faithful departed all the unsearchable benefits of thy Son's Passion; that in the day of his appearing they may be manifested as thy children; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

1 Corinthians 15:53 'For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality.'

Recently I have been researching the anthropology of humour expressed in different societal groups, (watching pranks on the internet). I've noted that Koreans are obsessed by ghosts, and Malaysians by mythical creatures who terrify local people in a comedic fashion. Eastern people are alert to the presence of disembodied spirits. The pranks in Korea often involve white-faced, black-eyed apparitions haunting places, such as bathrooms and lifts. The Malaysian pranks are nearer to slapstick, and people could end up knocked into a pond or river. But, in both populations authentic fear of ghosts is exhibited for our entertainment. In our own culture, fun takes the form of testing a victim's credulity: for example, by asking them to obey ridiculous instructions, pressing button after button on a telephone answering service, and seeing how much it takes to provoke their objection. All cultures have an inbuilt reflex to obey authority, even when it is exerted to their detriment. A famous psychological study, the Milgram Experiment of 1963, showed how people would be prepared to inflict serious physical damage on somebody if told to do so by a person in a white coat.

The link between believers in ghosts and credulous people being duped in any cultural context, is that there has to be mutual understanding between victim and prankster. Behaviour has to be relatively predictable. Belief has to be strong. In our gospel today, St John takes great care to ensure that there is absolutely no doubt that Lazarus is dead and has started to decay. The public raising of him from the tomb, is not a stunt. If intended to be a prank, it would not have been funny! How can Jesus change the humanly predictable? How can He recall Lazarus' spirit from the land of the dead?

If Jesus had arranged with Lazarus to pretend he was dead, it would have backfired. The latter had been baked in a hot airless cave for four days. Lazarus had to be real; he had to suffer death, perhaps facing up to his own mortality in the days when his illness deteriorated. In John 11:35 we read 'Jesus wept.'

St John is setting up something that demands credulity and faith. The incident is meant to stress the power of Jesus over death itself. Jesus, we are told in John 10:40, had gone across the Jordan to the place where John the Baptist had first baptised, Bethany beyond the Jordan. It was a place of repentance and death to self. It is stressed that John had not done any miracles there, but Jesus did. They believed what John had said about him was true. They saw him heal people there. Near this Bethany, Elijah had passed the mantle of the spirit to Elisha before ascending to heaven. Jesus figuratively takes the mantle of John, and crosses the Jordan entering into the Promised Land to claim it for God. It took four days for Jesus to get to the other Bethany nearer to Jerusalem. From the depths of the Jordan valley, 1300 feet below sea level at its deepest, Jesus ascends to nearly 3800 feet above sea level. So, he has entered into the deepest depths to wash mankind of its sins, and climbs to the highest peak to challenge the killing power of the devil almost directly opposite where His own death will occur on Calvary.

Lazarus' death embodies the tragedy of the human soul. It cannot help itself. Only God can help it, and only God can help *us* when we face the time that will surely come to all of us; unless we are physically alive on earth when the last trumpet sounds and Jesus appears to claim his kingdom. It is a powerful demonstration of Jesus power over the body and the soul. Like some of you, I have wept at the bedside of loved ones who have died. The breath of life departs from their body, and they leave behind a shell for which they have no further use. If Jesus loved Lazarus so much, why did he not only let him die, but raise him from the dead? Surely it would have been better for Lazarus to sleep in Sheol, at rest, until God calls the righteous dead to join him in paradise? Of course, not many have the slightest inkling of what the departed spirit 'thinks' about, or is aware of, when it leaves the human body. Some claim to have near death experiences, leaving them with peace and reassurance, or with a conviction of their need to live a penitent life. Most claim that they will now have no fear of death, even if they did have prior to this.

Today we commemorate All Souls. Our Collect reminds us that God is our Maker and Redeemer. The soul is made by God and redeemed by Him from eternal death by the death and resurrection of God Incarnate - Jesus Christ. The soul is immaterial, unlike the body, which He also made. Our body returns to the dust, but the soul returns to the spiritual realm (Purgatory if it died with un-absolved sin) until it is given a new body by God after the judgement. Jesus has the love, the power, and the will to reunite Lazarus' soul to his body. In doing this He shows to all who believe, Romans 8:38 : 'Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' As St Paul says in our New Testament reading 1 Cor. 15:53: 'For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality.' Brothers and Sisters, let us not only pray for the souls of the departed, but that we ourselves will be ready.