

The festival of All Saints was originally dedicated to the multitude of Christian martyrs, those who had suffered and given up their lives for being followers of Jesus. Many of their lives and particularly their deaths became the stuff of legend. One of my favourite hagiographical stories, as they are called, is of the 3rd century bishop-martyr, St Denis of Paris. To the pagan authorities of his day, Denis was certainly a menace! So they marched him up to what is now Montmartre (Martyr's Hill) and beheaded him. They left his body for his friends to bury. But suddenly, the executed Denis stood up, picked up his severed head, walked ten kilometres while preaching the gospel to his followers along the road, and on arrival at his church proceeded to celebrate the Eucharist.

No doubt such popular tales abounded to provide encouragement for the faithful who still experienced serious persecution. Martyrdoms were expressed as victory rather than failure, associating the victims with the sufferings and death of Christ, thus bringing them to the fullness of his resurrection life.

All Saints' Day focuses on the hope of God's ultimate triumph and the rescue of God's people. The prophecy of Isaiah in our first reading expresses God's love and salvation through a wonderful image of a mountain on which there is a banquet of the finest food and wines, an image that Jesus drew on in his parables. To this banquet all are invited. It will only be fully revealed in the future, but there is an understanding that the saving God is with his people all along.

Our psalm today is a prayer that commemorated the entry of the ark of the covenant into the Jerusalem Temple. The part we read is a sort of examination of conscience, asking who is worthy to take part in the procession. On All Saints Day, this psalm serves as a reminder of how we are part of a great company of pilgrims travelling together to our destiny in the eternal home of God.

The New Testament reading from the Book of Revelation represents the future hope in cosmic terms. But what is noteworthy is that it is not exclusively about a life beyond this earth but also a future in which God's dream, God's kingdom finally becomes reality for the earth. Heaven and earth are brought together as one. Paradise, with which the Bible began, and was soon lost, is restored at the

Bible's conclusion. God is making all things new. As the people of God, the saints on earth today, we have been called to participate in the transforming work of God in building the new Jerusalem, the new world.

Today, in our worship, we are invited to share and express that vision. We have not come here to commemorate dead heroes of the past but to celebrate our union with living pilgrims, fellow citizens of the kingdom of God, our brothers and sisters in Christ who are already with the Lord in glory. We come again to celebrate the festival of all Christians, living and departed, and we do so in the time-honoured way that the Lord himself has given us, the way in which he is most especially present to us, as now when we gather to share in the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist.

And because Christ is risen, because he comes to us through his Spirit, his whole body is here too. We are joined with those who were ever baptized in him, lived in him, and died in him. All are living, and all are present, they with us and we with them as we share together in the great banquet and vision of eternal glory, the communion of the saints. As we gather now and indeed whenever we come together to do this, time stops, the barriers between life and death are down, the saints surround us, and heaven breaks in. Here, if we can open the eyes of faith, we are afforded a moment of light, of glory. We are enveloped in the love and life of God, together with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven.

Our readings today express this eternal vision of our faith, as well as the hope of a greater, better life on earth. In the Gospel of John, we heard a familiar story in which Jesus raises the dead Lazarus to life. Like so much in the Gospel of John, this story is best read as a parable, or a sort of window that sheds light on the Easter mystery and the destiny we hope for. We never look *at* windows but *through* them to see what they reveal, what is beyond them. When we read today's passage at surface level, the story is 'only' about the restoring to mortal life of someone who would later die again. Read purely as an astonishing miracle, it is hardly good news, especially for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones, or when we face our own mortal demise. But the heart and meaning of the story is in the conversation between Jesus and Martha which precedes our reading today.

Jesus expands Martha's understanding of resurrection life. Those who live in him will indeed die in the physical, mortal sense, but in the spiritual and greater sense they will never die. Resurrection life does not begin in the near or far future, on the so-called last day or sometime after we die. It begins as we are gradually transformed or converted to life in Christ. Once that begins to happen, physical death can never harm us. It is not the end but the gateway to the fullness of resurrection life with Christ.

Meanwhile, we have a job to do as the saints on earth today. We are the body of Christ on earth now; he has no other. We are the eyes, the hands, the hearts that God must use to extend God's reign of justice, love, and peace in the world today. Those hallowed ones who have gone before us, whose love, fellowship and prayers surround us as we worship, encourage us to persevere in our shared call to follow Jesus: to continue running the race along the sometimes-rocky road of life and faith that they have run and completed, until we finally share their joyful destiny with Christ in glory for ever.