

November 7, 2010

The Feast of All Saints

Luke 6:20-31

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, rector

THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

By the end of our worship this morning, many of us will have had stirred up within us either grief or memories of grief past. Death, and the loss that comes with it for the living, are part and parcel of life. The feelings that are awoken in us are not bad in themselves, however unwelcome they may be. They are reminders that we are alive and that the power of God is working in us, bringing us to new places on our journey toward our own end in the nearer presence of God.

In *The Divine Comedy*, Jesus' beatitudes play a prominent role in purgatory, of all places. Peter Hawkins is a Dante scholar who has spoken here. He points out that the beatitudes play an almost liturgical role in purgatory.¹ As a soul reaches the point of being able to lay down the burdens of his or her ego-driven sins, then the angel chants the beatitudes. "Blessed are you poor" calling for the response, "for yours is the kingdom of God." But no such antiphonal response is sung. The response is embodied in the newly impoverished penitent, a living beatitude, ready for the kingdom of God. So it is all the way through: "Blessed are you who hunger now," with the response being embodied and implicit, a soul ready to be filled with God's unspeakable love. And when we are in grief either for those we have lost or for brokenness that can never be restored, "Blessed are you who weep now" with the promise of embodying the laughter and rejoicing that is a sign of the Reign of God.

On this day we are surrounded by extraordinarily rich images of both the world to come and also of the promise of glory for those faithful who endure. I confess that many of these images, taken by themselves, leave me far less moved than they might: The saints triumphant in their bright array, surrounding the throne of the lamb singing eternal praise in the heavenly new Jerusalem, their happy home. What does not leave me cold in the least is the reasonable and holy hope that these images embody: the hope that the God who made us for Love in the first place can bring new life even out of death. The consequence of faith here and now, --trust in God, here and now --today—is not that death is overcome. Death will come to all of us. The consequence of faith here and now is not that *death* is overcome, but that that the *power* of death is overcome. The sting of death is no more. And death is not the victor in the battle for what really matters.

¹ Peter Hawkins, *Undiscovered Country: Imagining the World to Come* (Seabury, 2009) p.55

I came across this extraordinary thought in a novel called *Tinkers* by Paul Harding.² The novel is really a meditation on the relationships between fathers and sons at the time of their deaths. Here Howard is chopping wood and thinking to himself:

Your cold mornings are filled with heartache about the fact that although we are not at ease in the world, it is all we have, that it is ours but that it is full of strife, so that all we can call our own is strife; but even that is better than nothing at all, isn't it? And as you split frost-laced wood with numb hands, rejoice that your uncertainty is God's will and His grace toward you and that *that* is beautiful, and a part of greater certainty, as your own father always said in his sermons and to you at home. And as the ax bites into the wood, be comforted in the fact that the ache in your heart and the confusion in your soul means that you are still alive, still human, and still open to the beauty of the world, even though you have done nothing to deserve it. And when you resent the ache in your heart, remember: You will be dead and buried soon enough.

It is beautiful writing. What Howard is doing –at one level anyway-- is trying to sort out what is going on in his life given the reality of human finitude, --given the reality of death which comes to us all. There is a tendency in some Christian theology to read the story of 'The Fall' in *Genesis* and to think that in that story it is death that is the punishment for the son of Adam and Eve. If that is so, then death is understood as part of the fallen world and is something to be overcome. If instead we read Wisdom Literature, (Proverbs, Psalms, Job and the like) for an understanding of creation, then we see that death is a part of life, a part of the creation that God looked at and judged to be good. The consequence of sin is not death as such, but our *fear* of death, our *horror* of death; and our fear and horror of the loss that the death of those we love entails for us. The problem that God seeks to overcome is not death. It is rather the sting of death and the power of death in our imaginations and our lives.

Once we grasp the truth that is unveiled by the life and death and vindication of Jesus, then it becomes possible to "live as though death were not". Once we see that Jesus is the victim of the powers of this world and that he nonetheless decides that death is not the worst thing in life, then we see a new possibility which can be the source and ground of hope. In our story he is vindicated when he is given new life in the resurrection, and so the source of our hope is the unspeakable and utterly trustworthy love of God. When we begin to live as though death were not, even in the face of our grief, then we become signs of real and holy hope. We become people ready to risk things as economically absurd as generosity, --giving stuff away-- and forgiveness --which changes little or nothing about the past, but can change everything about the future-- even hope itself as we find God trustworthy for live today and tomorrow and even for ever.

² Paul Harding, *Tinkers* (Bellevue, NY, 2009) p.72

It is for reasons such as these that we can look at death, that we can celebrate the death of those we love even as we mourn, recognizing some victory of faith that means that death has lost its sting and no longer rules our lives. When we have hope then we can let those we love go, continuing on our journey of seeking to lay down the burdens of our egos that lead to brokenness and regret, being purified in the warp and woof of our lives and becoming a sign of reasonable and holy hope in an unbelieving world still held in the thrall of death.

“Blessed are you who weep now” for your tears become laughter and your seriousness and sadness become holy levity and joy as you are prepared for life in the nearer presence of God.

So today we pray as ever, responding to the gospel, giving thanks for the victory of those who have gone before, trusting that the Love who made us for Love will also lead each of us from strength to strength in the pursuit and service and joy of the Kingdom of God. In silence, thanksgiving and in response to the gospel, let us pray...