

November 1, 2009

All Saints' Day, Year B

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10, 13-14; Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

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A Reasonable and Holy Hope

"I believe in the resurrection of the body." For those of us educated in the modern and post modern world, that has to be one of the strangest claims of all. When we say the creeds at this point, we are not just talking about Jesus' body being raised, but about our own. What makes image or idea or doctrine so very difficult is that it is against the nature of things. We know what happens to our bodies when we die, and their being raised is not generally in the cards. So, we say, perhaps we are dealing with a metaphor, a way of talking about some continuing life after death. That's it. John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave but his *soul* goes marching on. Death is not the last word because some essential part of us that really and truly makes us who we are keeps on going.

But that is not quite right either because what is true in scripture is not so much that we *have* bodies, but that we *are* bodies. This separation of mind and body is a modern idea. Many would say it was given great force by Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am. But in the Bible body and soul are not seen as separable. If there is to be any kind of life after death, it must involve all of us because what God creates is good. So we are back to resurrection of the body. And back to real and rational problems. If my body is to be raised, I'd just as soon it was the one I imagine I had at twenty (although even that is a complete fantasy) rather than the one with a spreading midriff. It makes no sense to talk of the resurrection of the body in this way either.

No what we are talking about when we speak of resurrection of the body is our trust in God's unspeakable, almost unimaginable, love. We are saying that the one who created life in the first place can and does bring new life out of death. We know that we are not talking about mere resuscitation. In the stories of Jesus' resurrection he is usually not recognizable immediately. Mary thought he was the gardener until he called her by name. The disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize him until the breaking of bread. We are talking about some kind of new life, but after real and final death. We are not pretending that death is anything other than the end, even though we affirm that to people of faith death changes life rather than ends it.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane he had to come to terms with what really mattered. He could have gone against everything that had brought him to this point. He could have compromised his trust in God and sought to avoid death rather than continuing to live with absolute integrity. Or he could do what he did and decide that breaking faith with the source of all life was worse than

death. He went to the cross with no real expectation that things would turn out other than they did. At the third hour he died, and they took him, as they do every one of us, and placed him in a grave. And on the third day, the one who gave life in the first place gave new life out of and after death.

When we profess belief in the resurrection of the body, we are not talking about a natural process. We are professing belief in the extraordinary love and grace of God. No one knows what happens when we die, and no one knows what has happened to the saints who have gone before, even those we have known and loved, and who we remember in particular on this day. What we know and trust is God's love offered to us in so many ways over a lifetime. We practice the faith in the hope that when we come to Gethsemane we will be able to act with integrity even in the face of our fear of the unknown, putting our whole trust in God's grace and love as once we promised to do.

Where I am most often reminded of the truth of God's love beyond life is at communion. I do not want to reduce the importance of everything that we do here to a particular moment, but I find week after week that there is something about the moment of taking the bread and taking the wine that –just for a moment–brings memory of the past and hope for the future together in the present. From the perspective of eternity, the end of our life and the end of history are one and the same thing, and whatever will be is no longer constrained by time. I realize that I am in the realms of the mystical at this point and that our music and prayer and memories and even the commonplace action of coming forward to partake of commonplace things -- bread and wine – are much more adequate for expressing reasonable and holy hope than all the words in the world.

All Saints' Day is marked and shaped by our profession of belief in resurrection of the body, a reasonable and holy hope that the one who gave life in the first place can even bring new life after death in some way, shape or form yet to be revealed to us; an idea or image that points us to the unspeakable love of God available even now. So we pause, and for a minute or two keep profound silence and renew our response to the Good news of God in Christ and the love that makes us who we are. Let us pray...