

All Saints' Ganges November 3, 2024

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All Saints' Day

The raising of Lazarus

In John's gospel miracles are always referred to as "signs", because John understands that the significance of miracles is not simply that Jesus did dramatic healings that would normally be considered impossible. For John the importance of a miracle is what's significant about it, what it implies, not that it was something impossible.

Today we are celebrating All Saints, and in this church we are specifically named as all being saints. Most of us wouldn't imagine we are, or could be, saints. Saints, we usually think are people of extraordinarily deep spirituality whose lives are profound examples of who Christ calls us to be, and most of us live fairly ordinary lives and are well aware of our limitations. We look up to saints as people deeply blessed by God, as the holy exceptions which all of us are called to emulate but none of us are able to.

John's story of the raising of Lazarus challenges us to a deeper understanding of what saints are and what we are.

Notice how many parallels there are between Lazarus' death and new life, and what will happen to Jesus only a week after Lazarus' death. Jesus and Lazarus are both buried in a cave, for both there is stone over the entrance, for both there is a precise period of days between the death and their new life, for both, women are central to the events, and both are wrapped in burial cloths which come off at their new life. It's clear that John wants us to understand that in some way Lazarus' death and new life are a kind of reflection from the future of Jesus' death and resurrection which is about to happen.

John is suggesting that Jesus causes our resurrection and that ours will be in close parallel with Jesus', and that some aspects are being presented in Lazarus' new life.

Notice, also, ways in which the two accounts differ. Jesus deliberately waits four days before raising Lazarus. It's clear, John is saying, along with the specific concern by the women that there will be a stench, but also in light of the possible rumours when John was writing, that Jesus was seen

alive because he wasn't ever really dead. That's why John goes to some lengths to be absolutely clear that Lazarus was thoroughly dead and his body decomposing. More is being shown, John says, than simply the resuscitation of a dead person, this is the re-creation into fullness, of Lazarus' whole person.

Notice, too, that when Lazarus comes back into life he is still bound by his burial cloths, whereas Jesus body seems to have slipped through the burial cloths—remember how Jesus' head cloths were found in the tomb separate from the other cloths just as they would have been when his body was laid there. There are two distinct processes of Jesus' and Lazarus' entrance into new life. For Jesus, death couldn't hold him and he slips easily through the burial cloths, the symbols of death. For Lazarus, who John suggests stands for ordinary people like us, what bound us to death has to be unwound by others.

Finally, Lazarus returns to ordinary life and we never hear of him again except that the religious authorities plan to murder him so he will stay dead and so that Jesus will be exposed as a charlatan playing tricks on gullible people. Whereas after his resurrection, John describes Jesus as appearing to his disciples in extensive conversations.

These details tell us how John describes how we will be raised.

First, John is saying that we are given new life here and now, we aren't required to wait until our earthly life is over. In other words, being saints is a gift we can expect to receive in our ordinary life right now.

Second, notice that Lazarus, while a friend of Jesus, is never understood to be a disciple. He doesn't reach out, as the blind man Bartimaeus did last week, pleading for Jesus to help him. Jesus just acts out of profound care and affection for Lazarus, Lazarus contributes nothing to the Jesus' act of giving him new life. That means that God is moved by profound affection for each of us, and that our entrance into holy life in ordinary life doesn't come from our trying hard or being particularly good. Our saintliness is extraordinary in the ordinary and is simply an arbitrary gift by God from God's profound compassion. It's not we who are full of godliness, but God who had filled us with that new overflowing life.

Finally, notice that unlike Jesus, Lazarus needs the assistance of others to enter into his new fullness as a holy person. Others have to unwrap death

from around him and assist him out of death and into new life. That's true for us, too. The Christian community surrounds us with assistance in putting on our new life as saints—the prayers we say together, the eucharist we receive as a community, the readings in which the wisdom of earlier Christians such as John, are all ways in which the community surrounds us with love and births us into our new life as saints.

So, All Saints of Ganges, rejoice that you are indeed saints, made whole fully human by God's profound compassion and love for each of us, rejoice that the transformation has begun now and will continue until at the end of time we are caught up in the glory which God intended for us from the beginning of time.

And that makes all the difference now. Whatever worries and concerns and disasters are threatening us, and there are very many, they pale into insignificance in light of what is in store for us. And knowing that we are freed from wasting our energy on worry and doubt we are able to enact the love of God free from those old constraints of death. And despite our doubt, we have indeed been made all saints.

That's why at funerals we shout out, "Even at the grave we make our song, "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!" .

Rejoice, All Saints, for your lives have become one long Alleluia!