

For All the Saints

Psalm 24 v1-6; Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32 – 44; Revelation 21:1-6

We put our clocks back last weekend so I hope everyone's made good use of that extra hour. British Summer Time is strange, isn't it? It's sort of like our ultimate attempt to control time – which is ultimately uncontrollable so it's actually impressive that we manage to pull it off, that we all managed to get to church at the right time the next day. I've never actually stayed up until 2am to watch the time jump ahead to 3am or fall back to 1am. That must be the closest we get to some kind of time warp. I guess it's a little like staying up until midnight on New Year's Eve; when one year turns into the next; when we jump from one millennium to the next; December turns into January; when today turns into tomorrow.

But we know tomorrow never comes - because as soon as you get there, it's today. There was a silly song used on The Muppet Show a few years ago – about a small town in Ohio called Morrow (M-O-R-R-O-W), which as you can imagine, led to all kinds of confusion and lent itself well to all kinds of jokes. The song is about someone who is trying to catch a train to Morrow but missed the train going today and so would have to wait and go tomorrow. The song goes on and on, but at one point, the ticket officer sings,

“For the train today to Morrow if the schedule is right,
Today it gets to Morrow and returns tomorrow night.”

Tomorrow is one of those elusive places we're always looking ahead to, but don't ever seem to get there.

Do you remember the musical Annie? Annie sits at her window in the orphanage and looks towards tomorrow, "only a day away", whenever she's feeling hopeless, because she knows that **there's always hope**, tomorrow.

And Isaiah, our reading from the prophet Isaiah looks forward to tomorrow, **God's promised tomorrow**, and he sees a mountain on which “*the Lord of hosts will make for all the people a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines...*”

And John, the disciple, recording his incredible vision on Patmos, he looked towards tomorrow, **God's promised tomorrow** of a new heaven and a new earth, and John wrote of a voice saying, "*God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away... I am making all things new...*" **God's promised tomorrow...**

It's getting from today to tomorrow that seems to be the hard part. Sometimes it feels like we can't get to tomorrow. We're like that guy in Ohio trying to get to Morrow but he can't because the train has already left. We're like Annie, sitting in her orphanage window night after night, dreaming about tomorrow. We're like Isaiah, believing in God's promise of a new future. We're like John, seeing a vision in which death is no more... But actually, in cold fact, we're here, today, in the real world with its struggles and frustrations and sometimes tomorrow seems an awfully long way away. Do you ever wonder if tomorrow will ever come?

So then there's this story about Lazarus (who has already been dead for four days when we join the story) and Mary, sister of Lazarus, greets Jesus with, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" What a welcome - bold and outspoken, bordering on the rude, even! But how this welcome reflects Mary's personality, straight to the point even to the point of costliness. This was the Mary who wound her sister up no end when Jesus had previously visited them by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening instead of doing the dishes (but who had their priorities right?); this was the Mary who used a year's worth of perfume to anoint Jesus! "*Lord, if you had been here....*" Mary's not even able to look forward to tomorrow because her grief is so great and I would even say angry, yet Jesus stands with her. Jesus weeps. Jesus comes and shares Mary's sorrow. He doesn't experience it second-hand; he doesn't stand back and wait until it all dies down; he doesn't exclude himself from the harsh reality of life. No, he is with Mary in her hour of need. I think he wept because he loved Lazarus and because he felt the pain of death and the hurt of separation. He saw the grief of Mary and Martha and wept for all the suffering that death causes in the world. Death is the last enemy, and until it is destroyed, we too, like Jesus, will weep.

This is a strange and challenging story. Why didn't Jesus come to Bethany earlier when He first heard that Lazarus was ill and by-pass the horror of

death? I think the answer lies earlier in this chapter of John - so that God could be glorified; so that we could know that we have a Saviour who understands and experiences human life as we do. This story tells of a God who cares and gets involved in His creation in a marked contrast to the Greek gods of the day. The Greek gods were believed to be above emotion and never involved themselves in the lives of puny humans. No, this tells the story of a Creator God who constantly and repeatedly comes to His creation in acts of love - not waiting for us to better ourselves, to earn our salvation because, quite simply, we can't. A creator who participates to the uttermost in the lives of sinful men and women. That uttermost includes death.

In the beginning God created; God spoke to Moses and chose Israel to show His love to the world; God, in Jesus, came to dwell in human form with His creation experiencing the same compassion, frustration, indignation, the whole gamut of emotions we experience and God will one day bring down a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus said to Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life,*" not *I bring* resurrection and life but Jesus completely transforms death. "*He will swallow up death for ever*" (Isa 25 v8), "*death will be no more*" (Rev 21 v4).

So, is eternal life something that happens in some far off 'tomorrow', or something that happens now? Just where are we - today or tomorrow? Are we looking forward to what God has promised us, or celebrating what God has already done?

Well, both, of course because that's both the great hope and the great tension of our faith. Everything we celebrate is based on just that: **God has done great things for us, and we rejoice.** And God will do great things for us. Isaiah talked about sorrow and sadness being taken away in the future and death being destroyed in the future but the celebration is now: "*let us be glad and rejoice.*"

It's as if we are constantly living at a turning point in history, with the past behind us, the future ahead of us and God's promises as a pivot point. We must rejoice because God is always willing to come to us, we only have to accept.

So do we live lives that reflect this certainty - not lives that cushion us from the sadness and ache of the here and now with illness, poverty, injustice,

loss and death, Jesus shares all these things with us - but lives lived today rejoicing in tomorrow?

Later today we will remember those people we've lost - friends and family members who have died - and, through our hope in Jesus, we can still say, **"the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoice."**

And tomorrow we will still be able to say, **"the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoice."**

So as the saints of God, set apart not by our own ability or our own goodness but by solely by His grace, let us say with all the saints, **"the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoice."**

The hope God promises us is not just the future hope of banquets of rich food on holy mountains with well-aged wines. It is that, but it is also a promise that there is a little bit of tomorrow – our **God-promised tomorrow** – in our every day. It's a promise that every day, in every moment, God is rolling away that stone that keeps us inside wrapped up in whatever cloths are binding us, and every moment, that tomb is opened and God is peering in and saying in a loud voice – if only we could hear – "Come out!" God comes to us so we can live.

"The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoice."

Adapted from [christianchurchfoundation.org/Celebrating All Saints Day](http://christianchurchfoundation.org/Celebrating%20All%20Saints%20Day)