

Sunday 31st October 2021
Pentecost 24 and All Saints.
Ruth 1:1-18 & John 11: 32-44
Seed or Stone?

Tomorrow is All Saints Day, the 1st November, 55 days until Christmas Day (I thought you might like to be reminded of that most important fact). And Tuesday is All Souls' Day, 2nd November. This evening, Halloween, you can expect to have young people calling on you for Trick or Treat. All Souls' Day is a commemoration of the faithful departed and has been celebrated in the Church prior to 998AD. The first reference we have to All Saints' Day is in 373AD. It was originally celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost and in the Eastern or Orthodox Church that is still the day on which it is celebrated.

Halloween's origins date back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced sow-in). The Celts, who lived 2,000 years ago, mostly in the area that is now Ireland, the United Kingdom and northern France, celebrated their new year on November 1.

This day marked the end of summer and the harvest and the beginning of the dark, cold winter, a time of year that was often associated with human death. Celts believed that on the night before the new year, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred. On the night of October 31, they celebrated Samhain, when it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth.

The practice of invoking and venerating the Saints has long been a regular element in Catholic devotion. Support for this is found in Hebrews 12:1 which speaks of the Church being surrounded by a whole cloud of witnesses (those people mentioned in Chapter 11) and Ephesians 2:19 when Paul writes to the people of Ephesus that "they are no longer strangers and sojourners, but they are fellow citizens and saints and members of the household of God."

The first of our biblical stories for today concerns two ordinary women; two ordinary women who are survivors – their names are Ruth and Naomi. A famine in Judah had driven Naomi, her husband and their two sons to the country of Moab. Naomi's husband died there and her two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. Then the two sons also died without leaving any children behind. That meant, in a society without Social Welfare, Naomi and her two daughters in law were totally destitute. No husbands to care for them; no children to care for them in their old age.

A woman who was husbandless and childless in that age was referred to as 'barren' – a not very nice designation, but one which sums up their circumstances. It is a stark word –barren – which sums up their prospects for the future.

Alone and vulnerable Naomi tells her two daughters in law, "I have no more sons to offer you. You had better go live with your own people. Goodbye. I will go back to my own people in Judah."

One daughter in law follows the instructions of Naomi and leaves, but Ruth replies to her mother in law, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

For Ruth to say this to Naomi was absolutely amazing. Remember Ruth was a Moabite, not a Jew. Here was someone of another race, another religion and another nationality, another generation saying, "I will stick with you; where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people." It is a vow similar to that which Ruth took when she married Naomi's son.

Thus the Book of Ruth is the story of two tough, determined women who stick together, after life has dealt them a very rough break – two people, tied together by their circumstances, who are determined to survive and make the most of their circumstances.

The Book of Ruth and its story of two brave, though ordinary, women is often the Bible's way with the divine. The extraordinary arises with the ordinary. The heavenly breaks out amid the earthly. What we tend to call earthly and ordinary the bible wants to depict as the realm of God's amazing work among us.

The most striking feature of this simple and beautiful story is the sense of God's intimate concern in humble affairs. The new found faith of a simple Moabite girl, and her sacrificial love for her mother-in-law are woven in the great tapestry of God's plan of salvation. For descended from Ruth is King David and from the line of David comes, Jesus the Messiah.

If you want to meet and have an encounter with God, then the bible implies that you don't have to go off on some mountaintop and meditate there waiting for God to come to you. You don't have to rummage around in the recesses of your ego or get on a spiritual high. You just have to be, as Naomi and Ruth were, in some place like Bethlehem, trying to make your way in the world, attempting to make ends meet and dealing with the hand in life you have been given, getting along with what you've got. That is being saintly.

In other words, for those of us here in Christchurch attempting to cope with life in this city and nation, as we wonder what the future holds in light of the Covid 19 pandemic, and a community riven with difference of opinion as to whether we should be vaccinated or not, this is where God is. This is where God encounters us; this is where we live our ordinary everyday lives as Saints – people following Jesus Christ as best we are able to in our circumstances.

Ruth and Naomi, as two saints from the Hebrew Scriptures, show us the way that is embodied in its fullest with the coming of Jesus Christ. All Christians, by virtue of our baptism, are 'saints.' As Ruth and Naomi show us saints are ordinary, everyday, run of the mill people like you and me.

Few of us have a story as dramatic as that of Ruth and Naomi, but all of us have our own stories of loss and pain.

I was reading of a Minister in South Africa who was telling of a season of darkness in his life. His parents sent him a letter that contained these words, "O memory of a painful time, are you seed or stone?" His parents went on to say, "We pray that you

will find every day of that painful time to be seed that produces the harvest of the Spirit.”

As I reflected on this Sermon and the Scripture readings for All Saints’ Day, I couldn’t get out of my mind those words, “Are you seed or stone?”

A seed germinates, dies and gives new life. A stone simply sits in the ground taking up space but nothing productive comes from it while it lies in the ground. In order to be useful, it has to be put to some other use as in construction.

Saints are seed planters who give new life. They are people who are remembered not so much for what they say, but for what they do and how they treat people as being of worth and value.

Saintly people are people who show a high moral standard and treat other people with respect and honour them as children of God -members of the family of God. They are people who are prepared to walk with us, affirm us, mentor us, challenge us giving a kindly word of encouragement and providing a light for our way.

Saintly people are those who know that there is no love of God apart from a love for one’s neighbour. This is a love which shows itself in the refusal to exploit another person.

That is the way of Jesus who treated people as being of worth and value. This we find in our reading from the Gospel of John for today

I was reading a novel last week in which a Team leader had to visit a young lady and her children to tell them that her husband and their father had been killed. She listened and then through her tears and grief she looked at the bearer of the bad news and said, “My husband said that if ever anything bad happened you would be here for him. You can’t bring him back, can you?”

Our reading from John’s Gospel is a little bit similar to this story. Mary and Martha’s brother, Lazarus, has died. They are grief stricken, not only because of their loss but also because they were dependent upon him for their well being and social status. When Martha told Mary that Jesus was in their village, she ran to him and fell at his feet crying, “Master, if only you had been here my brother would not have died.”

Grief and anger well up in Jesus.

I want you to notice the depth of emotion that wells up in Jesus. In the face of the painful and sobering reality of death Jesus does not remain unaffected. He feels the anguish of bitter loss.

Secondly, take note that Jesus exercises an authority over the power of death that dares to proclaim that death does not have the final word. Unintimidated by the stench and decay of the tomb, he orders the stone over the cave/grave to be rolled away and then cries out to the dead man in a loud voice, “Come out.” Remarkably that is what Lazarus does. Jesus then says, “Unwrap him and let him loose.”

What do these Biblical stories concerning Ruth and Naomi and Jesus, Martha, Mary and Lazarus have to say to us as we celebrate All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day?

Firstly, Jesus reminds us that death is an undeniable reality for all of us, but it is not the ultimate authority. Death does not have the final word, and its power to bind is limited. The ultimate authority over both life and death is Jesus.

It is in this hope that we affirm on All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day – a day to remember those who have died; those who have lived lives of extraordinary beauty, devotion and grace; those whose unbounded witness, ministry and influence continue beyond the grave.

Secondly, as I said earlier in this Sermon, Ruth and Naomi, as two saints from the Hebrew Scriptures, show us the way that is embodied in its fullest with the coming of Jesus Christ. All Christians, by virtue of our baptism, are 'saints.' As Ruth and Naomi show us saints are ordinary, everyday, run of the mill people like you and me.

As a conclusion on this day when we celebrate All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, I want to draw our attention to one other word of advice from Jesus -We are to love our neighbour as we love our self.

Why? We honour the Saints of the Church not simply for their faith in Jesus and what they said. We honour them because of their faith in Jesus and how they showed this faith in loving kindness towards others.

We are not always good at loving others. We are not always good at loving ourselves. Many things come in the way of our loving ourselves and our loving others – things such as pride, envy, jealousy, selfishness, holding on to hurt, failing to forgive, greed – to name but a few.

When we realise that we are beloved of God and that our love for our self and others flows from God's love for us then we can treat others and our self as a favoured child of God rather than loathing our self or loathing others. To love God is to love self, to love others and to be loyal to them. This is the seed that germinates rather than the stone that lies cold in the ground.

To God be the glory. Amen