

**All Saints – Isaiah 25.6-9 & John 11: 32-44**  
**Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021 – Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton**

It's often said that life is a journey. For some, it is a journey through the vale of tears; for others it is apparently one long on-the-go party. For most, it's a bit of both, but whatever your experience, the description makes one assumption: that life ends at the grave. Faith, on the other hand, demands we look further and see the journey resume in the world to come. Psalm 23 describes it aptly: in this life, as we travel through green pastures and beside still waters, and also pass through the valley of the shadow of death, our hope is in the God who prepares a table for us so we may feast in his house for ever.

At All Saints-tide, we celebrate those who have journeyed before us through this life, and we believe now enjoy the celestial banquet. We give thanks for the first apostles, for martyrs who gave their lives for Christ, for teachers of the faith, leaders, evangelists, exemplars, healers, prophets, mystics and many more who have been noteworthy through the history of the church. And we give thanks for those who pass under the radar, the unsung heroes, the nameless to history, who have given selfless service in the name of our Lord. And we give thanks for those known to ourselves, our loved ones – parents and grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends – who brought us to faith or encouraged us on our journey. It requires no earthly authority to make a saint: as each Christian answers God's call and faithfully follows the twists, turns and bumps in the road, God endows holiness, and at journey's end, invites the faithful to the wedding banquet of the Lamb.

The big story of the Old Testament can be described as a journey by the people of God between mountains. God gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. From Sinai they pass through mountain ranges, across deserts, over rivers, all the time being formed as God's people (although this proves a frustrating endeavour, so often they go backwards rather than forwards) ... Until at last they come to Mount Zion, Jerusalem's mountain of God that offers a foretaste of heaven. The earthly mountain never quite lives up to that expectation, so 'Zion' becomes a way of speaking of the connection between earth and heaven. And so the prophet Isaiah is able to say: 'On this mountain, the Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples; a banquet of aged wine and finest meats.' At the end of the journeying of God's people is a feast worth looking forward to. For this, says Isaiah, is when death will be swallowed up, and the shroud that enfolds us all will be destroyed.

There had been a feast at the start of this journey. Back in Exodus 24, back on Mount Sinai, God had provided food and drink. Moses and Aaron, and 72 elders came forward onto the lower slopes, and God fed them and then revealed himself enthroned on a sapphire pavement. But here's the difference: this was for one nation, Israel. This was for a few key representatives, the elders, from whom one man, Moses, would be chosen to climb up higher. Now, this new feast promised by Isaiah, on the Lord's new mountain, is for everyone. The death-shroud that enfolds all peoples (that's all ethnic groups), the sheet that covers all nations (ie political entities) will be swallowed up for ever.

The sovereign Lord will go around wiping away every tear from all faces: each individual will be comforted by God. On the first mountain, God came to one people, hardly yet a nation, picked out a handful and fed them. On the second mountain, God's banquet is for all: it's universal. It's inclusive. Such is his feast.

As we travel through the journey of life in the steps of the saints that have gone before us, and look forward to feast in the world to come, we look out for the signs of the kingdom of heaven breaking in on earth, and seek to join in with what God is doing. May I suggest three interlocking ways we get do so? First, the exercise of hospitality and generosity is in itself a sign of the kingdom. A meal out with family and friends, or inviting them round, enjoying the company of others made in the image of God celebrates God's gift of choice food and wine. Let's make sure we're as inclusive as possible. You may know the film *Babette's Feast*: a very traditional, austere community, where self-restraint was expected and self-indulgence sinful, gradually became liberated through the most wonderful feast cooked up by this young woman, Babette. It is a beautiful picture: heaven on earth!

Second, such feasting becomes self-indulgence unless we notice those who are excluded, the poor, vulnerable and marginalised, and do something about it. God's provision is for all, in this life as well as the next. I think that's why so many people respond to the work of the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd, where no judgement is made about who is deserving and who is undeserving, but they simply try to help as best as they can according to the needs that are presented. It's a sign of the kingdom of God in our city.

Thirdly, God's kingdom cannot be reduced to acts of charity alone. The spiritual life of the kingdom continually breaks in. Each week, as we come to God's table – a table open to all – in the bread that is broken and shared, we discover afresh that foretaste of the banquet of heaven breaking in on earth; our journey sustained by the bread of heaven.

Jesus went on a journey too. His journey to the tomb of Lazarus was difficult and dangerous. His previous visit to Judea had not ended well, and he had to cross hostile Samaria to get there. A journey to see bereaved friends is never easy – important, but draining for any of us. There's often a lot of guilt around with bereavement, and sometimes blame. People blamed Jesus for not having been there and done something. Arriving, Jesus entered into the grief of his friends, Martha and Mary. Jesus wept. Jesus was deeply moved, even outraged. Anger is part of grief – for him, perhaps, anger at the eruption of death into the true order of things; anger perhaps at the platitudes spoken; anger perhaps at the unbelief all around him and the demand he prove himself once more. Yet Jesus had a plan, a plan to demonstrate the power of God. He instructed the stone be rolled away. He commanded the dead man to come out. And out he came. They removed his grave clothes, the shroud in which he was wrapped, and as that happened, we see Isaiah's prophecy beginning to be fulfilled – for through Christ death itself is wound up. And guess what? – in the next chapter Jesus is found at home with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, sharing a good meal.