



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

All Saints' Sunday

Readings: [Isaiah 15.6-9](#), [Revelation 21.1-6a](#), [John 11.32-44](#)

3 November 2024

On All Saints Sunday, also our patronal festival, we encounter the vision of God. In the words of Jesus to Mary: 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?'

Seeing the vision of God lies at the heart of each reading and it's a vision for the peoples of the world. The prophet Isaiah invites *all* nations to stretch their imaginations to see themselves feasting in the presence of God who lavishes his overwhelming love on all. The writer of the Book of Revelation sees a new heaven and a new earth, with God surrounded by his creatures from all nations.

The Christian vision is of God in company with human beings. The God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God the Holy Trinity filled with life-giving love - overflowing in relationship - reaching out because that same love is a desire to spend eternity with us and all his creatures.

It's a vision of God in company with human beings, God bringing salvation. The shroud and therefore the power of death over the whole of humanity is destroyed. As death is defeated in the new creation, the tears of pain and mourning have given way to tears of joy.

From one end of the scriptures to the other, this is God at work in company with human beings, setting humanity free from its captivity to the power of death, offering the forgiveness of sins, bringing gladness into our lives.

And this vision finds its focus in Jesus as he is invited by a desperate Mary to 'come and see' where her brother Lazarus is entombed. The household at Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus is celebrated each year in the Church of England's lectionary and calendar on 29th July. This was Jesus' base during his Jerusalem ministry. In the words of the collect for the day, the Bethany house was a place of 'learning, argument and hospitality' and out of the friends' companionship emerges the depth of Jesus wisdom, the wonder of Jesus' compassion and the 'power to bring life out of death'.

St John takes us to the heart of Jesus in company with his friends, with those whom he is said to love. There is the radical candour of the exchange between Mary and Jesus with its under-tone of blame that Jesus had not been around in their hour of need. There is the evidence - in the stench from the tomb, Lazarus dead for four days already and the family's closet friend has only just arrived!

Notice the language that describes Jesus's response to Lazarus' death. Jesus shudders at the pain of bereavement. He is agitated, troubled, disturbed deep within himself, anguished at the loss of his close friend.

Jesus experiences the pain of the void that comes to all who experience the loss of loved ones. He carries the pain of Mary and Martha, his own pain of a broken relationship, the many complex feelings that come with bereavement, and no doubt the regret of not being there at the moment of death. His grief is beyond words, at best hard to describe, certainly hard to translate from the original language.

This is God mourning at the loss of one of God's saints but its God feeling the pain of the world, viscerally, deeply, in a way that remains for ever. In human pain is the presence of God in Jesus: God absorbing the pain, allowing it to change his very being, the psychological manifesting itself physically in the shuddering and the outpouring of tears. The pain of bereavement is being transformed into something new through which we are able to see the glory of God - all through the vulnerability of the God who chose to make his home amongst mortals, to go back to the reading from Revelation, so that death will be swallowed up for ever, to quote Isaiah.

Today is our patronal festival and so we give thanks for the life of this Collegiate Church of All Saints, Derby. We celebrate the life and witness of Christian worship on this site for 1100 years and our formal foundation by the Anglo-Saxon King Edmund of Wessex in 943. As a collegiate foundation, teamwork, collaboration, being with God in company for the mission of the church – this is part of our inherited DNA.

Today we commemorate our status as the Cathedral Church of the Bishop of Derby, granted in 1927. A cathedral church is a centre for worship and mission its diocese, a focus for the life of the Church of England in its place and time. A cathedral church is the seat of the bishop - cathedra' in the language of the ancient church means seat and represents the teaching ministry and the authority of the bishop across her diocese. A cathedral church is a gift made by the Dean and Chapter, and the cathedral community, on behalf of the diocese, to the diocesan bishop for her oversight of the people of God who gather across Derby, Derbyshire and parts of east Staffordshire.

This is a distinctive calling for us to fulfil and for which we are given key resources by our stakeholders. We receive gifts in order to be a gift to the bishop and the diocese, offering our vision and ministry, our networks and relationships, our music, and our worship, and all that we do for the good of the people of God, and the common good.

We are clear about our purpose - 'to be a place for all to explore faith, life, and heritage; a place of light, beauty, and innovation offering sanctuary, grounded in God's unconditional love revealed in Jesus Christ'.

We have a strategy that many of you are familiar with; we are developing our thinking and our planning for the future so that we might fulfil our potential as a Cathedral Church.

But a patronal festival is a moment to remember that as we travel on this journey so we are in the company of God, together with all God's saints, sharing in the transformation God offers to all humanity, seeking to offer for the sake of God's kingdom the precious gift that God has given to us in this Cathedral Church and aiming to do this even more effectively in the future.

Our purpose is for all, our vision is bold, our strategy is challenging. As we look to the future, as we plan and as we work together on the Cathedral's mission and ministry it's important that we embrace a sense of perspective, that we recognise that we are working with God and others for a future that will play its part in releasing the potential of the church in this place, and that we are aiming for God's vision to be realised not our own.

A meditation that is associated with Bishop Oscar Romero can help us. Oscar Romero was murdered as he presided over the eucharist on 24th March 1980 in El Salvador. Canonised by the Roman Catholic Church in 2018, these are words that have born his name ever since:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No programme accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

All we do is as workers in God's kingdom, recognising the long-term nature of our calling to be a cathedral church, relying on the one who is the master builder.

And God our master builder is calling us on a journey of growth and as we travel on that journey, so we embrace the experience of all humanity. Our calling is to be present as workers with God the master builder amongst the peoples of this world. This cathedral is here for everyone. We operate in the public realm. Nothing that happens in this city, our county and further afield is beyond our interest and engagement because we are in partnership with God to witness to God's vision for all peoples.

And as I close: we mustn't forget that Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the tomb was a turning point; its outcome was that the religious establishment plotted for Jesus' execution and death. That was part of the agony of Jesus' own suffering, the tension between responding to the grief of Mary and knowing that his future action would initiate the trajectory of his own suffering. Mary's tears of grief turn to tears of joy, yet for Jesus it's the pathway to his own pain and death.

This is the good news for the world and for each of us. In the raising of Lazarus whom he loved, in the midst of his friends, amongst his closest companions, in the communion of saints, Jesus offers up his life for the world. This is God in company with human beings bringing salvation to all peoples. All Saints Day is our invitation to believe in Jesus and to see the glory of God in death defeated, sins forgiven, the gift of eternal life and the vision of God realised in front of us. Amen.

The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby