
Hope, Now and Beyond

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
Choral Requiem Eucharist on the Sunday after All Saints' Day

I don't know about you, but I can scarcely recall a time when the Feast of All Saints has felt more welcome than it does right now. It's not just the glorious music, the soaring hymns and anthems, the spectacular flower arrangements, or the beautiful gold vestments and paraments—we enjoy these every year. Nor is it only the opportunity to remember those dear to us who now live in the nearer presence of God, though this is a powerful and comforting thing. Indeed, it is surely what has drawn many of us here today, this chance to offer our grief to God and to seek God's healing and reassurance.

All of this is big, big stuff. But what feels especially big to me about All Saints' this year is its definitive reminder that our present reality—what the apostle Paul once called “this present darkness”—this is not all there is. Our present reality is not all there is. There is so much more to our lives with God and with one another than we can ever comprehend in our own very limited time and space. So much more than we can ever see, hear, or touch. So much more than the news of the day can report. So much more than our captivity to cynicism and fear can allow. So much more than the deep, raw pain of grief can hope. In a world marred by seemingly endless disaster and discord and sickness and violence, All Saints' Day reminds us in no uncertain terms that there is also love and grace and healing and redemption—love and grace and healing and redemption that is manifesting itself in ways far greater and more widespread than we can ask or imagine.

Our first reading from the Wisdom of Solomon speaks to this truth when it asserts: “The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction, but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.” *Their hope is full of immortality.*

Our hope is full of immortality, too, and this hope can sustain us in the toughest of times. It will get better. It will get better. But not just that. It already is better. All appearances to the contrary and regardless of how we may feel on this day or any other—all appearances to the contrary, there is a world in which all of the pain and friction and division and regret have already been healed, and that world is breaking into our own world even now, bit by bit by bit.

All the hurt and injustice and oppression visited on the most vulnerable among us by those who have the power to do better, all the dreams unrealized, all the grief unassuaged, all the things we said and did that we wish we hadn't, all the things we wish we had said and done but did not—somehow, all of this will be set aright and, indeed, is already being set aright. And so even now, we need not be destroyed by the darkness and terror and tumult of life, by wars and rumors of wars. We need not keep one another at arm's length because of anger and division and fear and shame.

For we are made for community, you and I, for communion. We are made for communion with one another, yes, but also with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven. In the words of a beloved hymn, we are blessed with “friends on earth and friends above.” Today is a day for celebrating especially these friends above, friendships in which we are supported, all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, by those who saw and endured things just like we have. Those who were not perfect—far from it—but who, when the time of testing came, sought to be faithful to God and found that God was faithful to them. Those who are cheering us on even now as we face our own trials. People like Martin Luther King, Pauli Murray, and Jonathan Myrick Daniels of the civil rights movement. People like Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, 19th century Bishop

of Shanghai who, after suffering a stroke that left him almost completely paralyzed, used his two working fingers to continue typing out his translation of the New Testament into Mandarin for his Chinese flock. People like Constance and her Companions, who, during a terrible yellow fever epidemic in Memphis stayed in the city to the nurse the dying while virtually everyone else fled. People like the man who swept floors at Grady Hospital each day until he himself became a patient and, even then, still managed to offer a comforting word to others who were hurting. People like the parishioner who, after she was no longer able to leave her apartment, continued her ministry here at the cathedral by making phone calls to the sick, the bereaved, and the lonely. People like a parent or spouse or partner or friend who loved us at our best and at our worst. People like the tiny baby whom we never really got to know and who now feasts not at her mother's breast but at the heavenly banquet. We may not see these beloved of God in the way we once did, but they are with us. They are with us.

Every now and then in church on a magnificent Sunday like this or on an average Tuesday afternoon stuck in gridlock on 285—every now and then, something inside us loosens just enough so that we can catch a glimpse of their glory. We can sense the presence of those whom we have loved and lost and know that indeed, we are all one in Christ Jesus. Like Lazarus in today's gospel reading, we come unbound, if only for a moment—we come unbound from all that would hold us and our world in the grips of death. We come unbound so that our arms can be free for embracing—embracing all those saints who came before us, embracing all those saints and allowing ourselves to be embraced by them. Embracing all those saints beside whom we run the race of faith now, even in the midst of all that threatens to divide us. For, you see, there is loving and losing, but there is also loving and finding. And there is the hope of immortality—now! Amen.