

‘Unbind Him and Let Him Go’ – A Homily for All Saints

Wisdom 3.1-9

Revelation 21.1-6a

John 11.32-44

One of my favourite windows at All Saints is that of the Church Triumphant in our South Transept, designed by Clement Bell and affectionately called a ‘Te Deum’ in glass. At the centre of this elegant window can be seen Christ in glory, flanked by the saints and angels of the Eastern and Western Church resplendent with colour. The window indeed reminds us of that great hymn of the Church composed by Ambrose and Augustine in the fourth century, and sung at Matins throughout the cathedrals of this country:

The glorious company of the apostles praise thee;

The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise thee;

The noble army of martyrs praise thee.

The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee.

This is the Church where it should be, gathered around Jesus and given over to worship, and it reminds us that it is in worship that we are brought most fully to life, in which our lives can be pierced with the radiant life of God itself. As Rowan Williams puts it, ‘this humanity – yours and mine – is still capable of being embraced by God, shot through with God’s glory, received and welcomed in the burning heart of reality itself.’

Vladimir Lossky, one of my favourite Orthodox theologians, notices a difference between the ways the Western and Eastern Church depict and understand the life of the saints. ‘Western saints and mystics,’ he says, are ‘as it were living patterns of the suffering Christ,’ whereas ‘by contrast, Eastern saints have appeared resplendent, like Christ on the mount of Transfiguration.’ So often in the West, saints are called to imitate Christ in his suffering, and we see this most clearly and provocatively in those whose mystical union with Christ result in the stigmata, bodily wounds that mirror Christ’s own wounds upon the cross,

appearing in such saints as Francis of Assisi or Catherine of Siena. Just like Jesus, the saint is someone who is a companion in suffering, perhaps standing by someone in the darkest depression, or sitting at someone's bedside as their approach death, or else holding someone's hand and listening to their stories of loss and pain. Perhaps, in the end, the stigmata is not so much about a bodily wounding, but a sign that those who are real saints are those who allow themselves to be wounded by another's pain, to be hurt by those things that have hurt others, to become what Nouwen calls 'a wounded healer.'

So, for the Western tradition, being a saint is to imitate the suffering way of love made known in Jesus. But for the Eastern tradition, the lives of the saints are most clearly displayed in their sacred iconography, windows into heaven that open up portals from our world to the world beyond, a little like the wardrobe in *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe*, an ordinary thing that opens out into a world of mystery and magic. So, if Western saints point us to the cross, Eastern saints are doorways to glory. You will notice as you gaze upon an icon that its surface is rather flat, there is no shadow or shading as the world it depicts is a world utterly alive to the beauty and glory of God. The saint is seen as already glorified, face uplifted and enlightened, enframed by a halo of light and coming forward from a background of pure gold. For the Eastern tradition, the saint is someone who is so fully alive that death cannot even touch them. We might think of those early church figures whose funerals were celebrations of life and hope, and those who faced martyrdom with open hearts and courageous faith. And we've all met such people today, those unmarked by the cynicism of our age, those who live with a simplicity and giftedness that is nothing but contagious.

In our gospel reading today, we discover that the life of the saint – your life and my life – is to be lived in the space between death and life. In what is the pivot around which the whole gospel of John turns, Jesus arrives too late to prevent the death of his cousin and friend, Lazarus. In a scene that is at once utterly human and yet completely divine, Jesus weeps with Mary, seemingly lost in grief, 'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.' But Jesus is so fully alive to God that he is like a searing fire and as he draws near to Lazarus, death loses its grip

and the earth spews him forth. 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' asks Jesus. And with these words Jesus takes us to the heart of the theology of John's gospel, a gospel of dramatic reversals and devastating paradox. Even as the glory of God is seen in the word of Christ that undoes the very power of death, 'Lazarus, come out!' John asserts that this glory will be demonstrated all the more clearly in the seeming defeat and dislocation of the cross. For the vision of utter abandonment on the cross, and the calling of each of us back to life, is nothing but the same vision, the vision of suffering and triumphant love. And it is this love alone that sustains the life of the saints, and transforms our very world.

In the end, Lazarus himself is a symbol of what it means to be a saint. He is one, like us, who has been called away from all that is deathly and destructive, called back into life by the energetic word of Jesus himself, and yet, as Lazarus emerges from the tomb, he is still bound up 'with strips of cloth,' still entangled with the weakening snares of death. And so Jesus issues another command, this time to the disciples round about him: 'unbind him and let him go!' Lazarus, like each of us, slowly moving from the darkness of death into the light of Christ, needs to learn the lesson that only a life-time can teach us, 'that the ascent of the soul is nothing but the mounting of calvary,' that it is death that opens out to life, that the way of the cross is nothing but the way of life itself, that to be a saint is to know love in all its fullness, both in its suffering and in its triumph. AMEN.