

All Saints Day and Halloween
November 1 and October 31 respectively
Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6a

All Saints Day is a feast day of great antiquity. References to such a feast are noted by St. Ephrem Syrus (who died in AD 373) in his papers and by the great preacher, Chrysostom (who died in 407). It received pontifical authorization by Pope Boniface IV on May 13, 609, and has been celebrated by all the church ever since. In the Western churches, it is celebrated on November 1 of each year, while in the Eastern churches, it is celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost. In churches that do not celebrate the daily hours, All Saints Day is observed on the first Sunday of November.

The purpose of All Saints Day is to honor all the Christian saints, known and unknown, who have been part of God's work through Christ upon the earth. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it, it is a day for celebrating all "the Saints, Martyrs and Doctors of the Church". It is followed by All Souls Day (November 2), in which the church commemorates all the souls of the faithful departed. Thus, with the observance of both these days, we remember all those in Christ who have gone before us, back to the Apostles themselves.

And what does **Halloween** have to do with all this? It is All Saints Day that gave rise to the celebration of Halloween, or "All Hallows Eve" (All Saints Day was also called "All Hallows Day" or "All Hallowed Day"). In the medieval church, All Hallows Eve emerged from the mythology and story telling of the people as the night that the ghosts of the dead prowled the earth, waiting to be honored on the next two days. This was never official teaching of the church (in fact, the church greatly discouraged it), but it rapidly caught on in popular culture. People envisioned that the dead walked about the earth as skeletons, ghosts or in their ancient clothes, knocking on people's doors and demanding treats or face the consequences. Most people huddled in fear in their homes, townspeople would set giant bonfires to both illuminate the town and drive away the evil spirits, and young pranksters would dress up in costumes both to scare people and to gather booty. Halloween was greatly feared by most medieval and Renaissance people, and they were relieved when the light of November 1 dawned and the feast day began!

Isaiah 25:6-9 is likely the perfect passage from the Hebrew Bible to reflect upon for All Saints Day. But understanding it is limited if one does not first comprehend the ancient Canaanite myth upon which it is based.

The Canaanites worshipped the storm god Ba'al as the chief god of their divine pantheon. In Canaanite mythology, Ba'al hosts a banquet for all the gods upon the highest of mountains. That banquet is held to celebrate his defeat of the god of chaos (Yamm, the chaotic sea god) and his enthronement as the chief god of all the gods. But after the banquet, it becomes apparent that Ba'al's defeat of Yamm has unleashed chaotic forces throughout the world that are unstoppable. Those chaotic forces, symbolized in the god of death, Mot, now overwhelm Ba'al and he is swallowed up by Mot and moves through his digestive system, there to die in Mot's stomach. Thus, the chief god of the Canaanites has been destroyed, as is every god, every human and every society created by humans. It is the popular understanding of this myth that Isaiah uses in

his prophecy of 25:6-9, as he “converts” it in his proclamation of the person and work of Yahweh.

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (25:6). It is Yahweh who will hold his coronation feast, not Ba’al. And it will be held, not on a high mountain, but on the Temple Mount (Mount Zion), the seat of God’s throne and the place where earth and heaven meet. To this feast, God will gather guests from all the nations (cf. 24:14-16; Rev. 14:6) of the world. And he will provide for them the richest of foods and wine, for he is creator both of humanity and of the abundance of life.

“And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken” (vss. 7-8).

Isaiah now turns the Canaanite myth on its head. And he does so by using the twin name, “Lord God” or “Sovereign Yahweh” – that is, the covenant name of God (cf. 28:16; 40:10; 52:4; 65:13). The god with whom humanity is dealing here is not Ba’al (the storm god), Yamm (the sea god) or Mot (the death god). This is the “Lord God” – the sovereign god, Yahweh – the one who “causes to be what is caused to be”. And “sovereign Yahweh” totally decimates and obliterates Ba’al, Yamm, Mot and any other deity humans can concoct.

Yahweh will destroy the power of death that “shrouds” all peoples, that spreads “over all nations”. The great swallower of humanity, Mot, will himself be swallowed by Yahweh, who will “wipe away the tears from all faces” and will conquer death. When reading this hymn of praise, one can shout with the Apostle Paul, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (I Cor. 15:55). In fact, Paul quotes from this passage in Isaiah in I Cor. 15:54, and Rev. 7:17 quotes from the last part of Isaiah 25:8.

“It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (25:9). The sovereign Yahweh, creator of the universe, shaper of history and the one who both controls and conquers death, is “our God”, “the Lord for whom we have waited”. He is the God who identifies himself with his people – Israel, the Church, the “saints, martyrs and doctors” of his people (Isa. 26:13; 40:4; 61:6). Under his reign, chaos is destroyed, creation is ordered, and God’s salvation comes to the people and to their societies. Life is centered and finds its beginning and end in this Yahweh. Therefore, we can “be glad and rejoice in his salvation”!

Psalm 24 is a “psalm of ascent”. In other words, it is a psalm that is to be sung as Israel’s priests and people parade up to the Temple in a religious ceremony. It is a psalm that is well known to all readers of scripture. But what is particularly significant about it is that this psalm directly addresses the relationship between the wilderness tradition and the monarchical tradition of Israel.

The psalm begins by proclaiming the wilderness tradition. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers” (24:1-2). The whole earth, the Psalmist declares, is God’s temple. Therefore, God does not need a temple made with hands. The foundations of that authentic temple (the world) are the seas. The pillars of that temple are its trees and rivers. The Psalmist perceives the earth as God’s true temple floating upon the seas of chaos, its rivers and trees holding up the dome of the heavens (and the chaotic waters above the roof of the heavens). Walking this earth is to walk in God’s authentic temple, as one sees the land – the earth literally – and its divisions into peoples and tribes and nations, filled with abundance of crops and fruits and the fecundity of its animals and people. It is not an empty, echo-filled temple but one that is lively and active and vital. As such, Psalm 24 is a perfect echo of Isaiah 25, proclaiming nature as the creation of God and not of Ba’al.

The psalmist then introduces the monarchical tradition and its center in the human-built temple in Jerusalem. The second temple, the one that was constructed by humans, is a microcosm of that larger earthly temple. It is God’s handiwork in miniature (vss. 3-6). It pales in comparison to God’s temple of the earth. But it is a means by which Israel can be particularly aware of the presence of God in their midst. So God condescends to enter this man-made temple and to occupy it (vss. 7-10). And because God so chooses to take up occupancy in this building made by human hands, he expects all those who also enter this temple to worship him to be of “clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully” (vs. 4). That is the company whom God receives in this, God’s throne room!

Thus, the psalm ends by inviting God into this space dedicated and offered to him, and thus inviting all who would worship this God to enter that space in which God chooses to dwell. “Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts; he is the King of glory” (vss. 9-10).

John 11:32-44 is the central story in a much larger story (11:1-59) of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead. The larger story divides neatly into three parts. 11:1-27 sets the stage for the miracle. 11:28-44 tells us the resurrection story itself. And 11:45-57 records the responses of the Jewish ecclesiastical elite to the event and its consequences for Jesus’ ministry.

The text begins by introducing the reader to Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha (11:1-2), reporting the brother’s illness. Verses 3-6 report Jesus’ refusal to come immediately to care for his ailing friend. Verses 7-16 record Jesus’ conversation with his disciples, refusing to leave until he is sure Lazarus is dead. Finally, verses 17-20 tell of Jesus’ arrival near Bethany four days after the death of Lazarus. It is there that Martha confronts this supposed friend of Lazarus who wouldn’t come when, in her opinion, he could have been of genuine help (vss. 21-24). Martha questions Jesus’ friendship with Lazarus and his caring for her and her sister, Mary. Jesus responds with his famous statement, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (11:25-26)

The statement is meant to challenge Martha – and through her, the church. Jesus declares that resurrection is not some act, but rather it is a person – Jesus, the Logos of God. He is your hope for authentic and fulfilling life. Believing this and living within this reality makes of the church a revolutionary body, for they believe that, even though they may be individually killed for their witness, there is no way to kill God’s work of transformation among humanity. Though you may die for Christ and His Kingdom, in a most profound sense you will not die, because physical death cannot separate the disciple from the resurrected Christ.

So the real issue is, “Do you believe this?” If you believe this, then you have authentically joined an unstoppable force for the transformation of the world. You have become unstoppable because you can no longer be intimidated by anything the political, economic or values-maintaining systems of the dominant culture can threaten to do to you. Whether as an individual or as a community of faith, you can no longer be compromised or intimidated, and therefore you will conquer in the name of Christ. “Do you believe this?”

With Martha’s response that she does so believe (vs. 27), the story then moves into its second section – the actual resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. It begins by telling us that, as Jesus approaches the tomb, he is emotionally wrought. “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. . . . Jesus began to weep” (11:33,35)!

Arriving at the tomb, “Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb” (12:38). The Greek word translated “disturbed” is a very powerful word, originating from the snorting of a war-horse. It is a word much stronger than its translation, “disturbed”. It means deep anger, substantive and justifiable outrage. The second word “moved” connotes profound fear. Both together depict a Jesus who is profoundly moved, deeply disturbed and in emotional pain. What is he so upset about?

What he is upset about is not simply people’s grief at Lazarus’s death, but at their unbelief! They truly believe that death has the last word. They do not understand that Jesus *is* life, *is* the light, *is* God’s incarnate Word to humanity. They simply don’t recognize who is in their midst. They accept the lie of their religious leaders, the political and economic systems that reign supreme, those who can bestow death upon any who question their authority. But death – even execution for opposing the systems -- is not the final word. Jesus is! Jesus is their resurrection and life, if they only embrace him as such. But, even in the face of his physical presence there at Lazarus’ grave, the people – and even Mary and Martha and his disciples – believe that death has the last word. No wonder Jesus snorted in anger and pain at their blindness of heart and spirit!

So, grieving in his spirit over the unbelief of all who surround him – friend and foe alike – Jesus arrives at the tomb. He commands the stone to be taken away, prays to God in a way that says to the crowd, “Pay attention and learn”, and then cries out, “Lazarus, come forth!” And shuffling out of the tomb comes Lazarus, still wrapped and constrained in the grave clothes in which he was buried!

Then Jesus instructs the people, “Unbind him, and let him go” (v. 44). Resurrection is incomplete until the people participate in it and thereby own it. They must assist the resurrected

Lazarus to reclaim all of life. Jesus raised him from the dead. But it is the people who must unwrap him and set him free!

And what was it from which they were to unwrap this resurrected man? It was certainly the grave clothes, the traditional garb in which each dead Jew was wrapped in that day. But the grave clothes both of Lazarus and of the people consisted of far more than linen shrouds. None of them – Lazarus, Mary, Martha or the people – could be freed until they had been freed from the stultifying traditions and limited thinking in which the systems held them in bondage. That over which Jesus so greatly grieved and brought such snorting “disturbance” to him (vv. 33, 38) had to be “unwrapped” from the people if they were to let the “dead” be resurrected and walk free again. Their unbinding of Lazarus could allow for their unbinding, as well – so that *all* could go free!

But the story of Lazarus’ resurrection does not end on this happy note. That story now reaches its climax in 11:45-57. This act of resurrection is such a powerful sign that Jesus is indeed who he says he is, that not only do many of the people believe. Even some of the “Judeans” (the term the writer of the Gospel of John uses to speak of the priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the economic leaders of Israel) are converted to him, as well (11:45). Jesus has now invaded the enemy camp!

The Jewish Sanhedrin (Council) and Caiaphas, the high priest, meet for “damage control”. Whereas in their public confrontations with Jesus, they base their opposition to him on religious grounds (he is teaching heresy and breaking the Law), they freely acknowledge when they are in private that their opposition is far more diabolically determined (11:47-48). They are opposed to Jesus for political reasons. They want to remain in power and in control of the Jewish nation, and this they can do only through a rapprochement with Rome. But that contract with Rome depends upon their keeping of the peace and their capacity to control the people for the mutual political and economic advantage of both themselves and of Rome. Because Jesus is such a grave threat to that mission – particularly now that he has raised a man from the dead – they must eliminate him.

“It is better for you,” the high priest Caiaphas says to the Sanhedrin, “to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (vs. 50). The obvious solution, Caiaphas states, is that Jesus must be killed. Only his death can truly eliminate the threat Jesus poses to the continuing domination of Israel by Rome and the Jewish priesthood! It is at this meeting of the Sanhedrin that the decision is made. Now, it is simply a matter of creating the occasion, the incident that will permit the Sanhedrin and Rome to arrest Jesus, accuse him of both blasphemy (the Jewish crime) and treason (the Roman crime), and get him executed! And that occasion Jesus soon gives them when he conducts his triumphant entry into Jerusalem (John 12:12-19), a political action so blatant that the Sanhedrin can now make the charge stick that he is rebelling against Rome!

This, then, is the irony of the resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus returns a man, and even a people, to life once again. And for doing so, he, himself, must now die!

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is, indeed, the most fitting story for All Saints Day. For it is this story that reminds us that, rather than cowering from “goblins and ghosties and things that go bump in the night” (Robert Burns), the story of All Saints Day and even of All Hallows Eve (Halloween) is that our Lord triumphs over death, making it lose its sting, and that promises us that the last word is not its dominance but of souls and society set free to become – either in this life or the next – all that God created them to be! And not even a Sanhedrin – or Rome itself can stop him!

Revelation 21:1-6a. The archetypal city in the book of Revelation is the new Jerusalem. This is the city as God intended it to be – a city totally dedicated to God. It is described fully in Revelation 21:1 – 22:5.

Revelation 21:1-8 gives us the context for understanding the nature of God’s city. First, the city of God exists only within the context of a redeemed and transformed order. It describes the new Jerusalem as “a new heaven and a new earth”, but it is not suggesting that it is replacement of the present reality, as though God were starting all over again. The author doesn’t speak of God creating “all new things” but rather of making “all things new” (21:5) – that is, restoring them, renewing them, transforming them into political, economic and religious orders as God intended and created them to be. There is continuity with the old, but it is a God-transformed continuity.

The reason for this assertion becomes clear in verse 2: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband”. Both the image of a transformed environment and the image of an entire city being “let down” upon the earth exist in order to communicate the insight that the city of God will exist by God’s actions, and not by ours. The timing for when the cities of this earth become the city of God will depend upon God’s activity, and not ours. We will not build the city of God. Our task, rather, is to faithfully practice our vocation as God’s people in the city through our presence, prayer, practice, proclamation and our use of power.

In verses 1-8, we see four outstanding characteristics of God’s city. First, God lives in the city among his people (vs. 3). Second, there will be no grief, pain or death in God’s city (vs. 4). Third, the city will be the place where the hunger and thirst that people have for relationship with God will be assuaged (vss. 6-7). Fourth, there will be no place in God’s city for those who have rejected him or despised humanity (v. 8).

Who is the originator of this city? It is the only true God, “the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (v. 6). This is the God who stood faithfully by his people from the call of the patriarch Abraham to leave the city of Ur to the call of the church into the city, from the formation of Israel through Moses’ confrontation of the principality of Egypt to the church’s confrontation of a “divine Roman emperor”, from the beginning of the creation to the end of time. This God causes to be what is caused to be, and thus will bring to pass the city he has promised.

One of the most unique aspects of the book of Revelation is the detail with which it describes the quality of life in the new Jerusalem. I believe it is described in such detail to give us hope as we in urban ministry seek to be faithful, though we are often overwhelmed.

The first emphasis on the quality of life in the new Jerusalem deals with the size of the city. Revelation 21:9-17 includes elaborate measurements of the new Jerusalem. The measurements are quite extraordinary.

The city is a square: 12,000 *stadia* (v. 16) or 1,400 miles (2,200 kilometers) to a side. That is an absolutely immense city that dwarfs even the largest projected cities of the next several centuries, nevermind cities of first century Rome! To give us a sense of the immensity of the new Jerusalem, if that city were placed down upon the globe today, it would stretch from New York to Denver, or from Sao Paulo Brazil to LaPaz Bolivia, or from Nairobi Kenya to Kinshasa Zaire, or from Calcutta to Delhi or from Bangkok to Taipei. Who can imagine a city of that size?

Why such a large “new Jerusalem”? Could it be to suggest that God built the city this huge so that there is room for absolutely everybody? Is the city therefore a visual symbol of the inclusivity and peace of the kingdom of God?

God’s city is meant to be a refuge for the entire world’s believing immigrant population. In God’s city, there are no slums, no squatter settlements, no favellas or barrios or bustees! There are no governmental policies to keep people out or any economic standards that exclude the marginalized from effective participation in the marketplace. God has built the city for the whole world!

The city is not only immense, but also wealthy beyond imagination. The second emphasis on Jerusalem’s quality of life is its wealth. The walls and city gates are described as gem-laden (Rev. 21:18-21) and the city’s streets are paved with gold. What was precious in the former world is now so plentiful that it is used as common building material. Thus the city is described as a society in which all its people will live in plenty and security. All poverty will be gone, as well as all the exploitation and oppression that inevitably is generated by the maintenance of an unbalanced economy that favors the rich.

The third emphasis on the quality of life in God’s city is most intriguing. “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22). The city has no churches!

Why would there be no churches in a city whose creator and sustainer is God? Does God not want to be worshipped? Of course he does, but the Lord does not need churches to provide that function! The church is a foreshadowing of the kingdom of God, God’s kingdom in miniature. But it is not to be mistaken for the kingdom itself. It was created to be transitional and temporary, the means by which God remains present in the city of humankind. It exists between the resurrection of Christ and Christ’s return in glory. The church is unnecessary in the new Jerusalem where God can be directly present to his people.

“The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are (the city’s) temple”. The center of the life of this city is God, and the center of the people’s focus on God is worship. The life of the city – its economics, its political order, its religion – is centered in God, for this is the city of God.

The new Jerusalem is city as God intends the city to be. This will be a city fully under God, a religious environment where all will be in relationship with God and thus in shalom with each other (Rev. 21:3, 6-8, 22; 22:3-4). God’s city will also be one practicing an economics of plenty, equitable distribution of wealth and security, where poverty will be unknown (Rev. 21:13-14, 18:21, 26-27; 22:1-2). This will include a transformation of the natural order so that all will be healthy and death, illness, grief and pain will be gone (Rev. 21:4, 25). Finally, the city will have a political order which is centered in God with room for everyone, a city whose political life will be completely just and in which everyone will play a part in the city’s governance (Rev. 21:24-25; 22:5). This will include a centralization of all international affairs in God’s city as all governments of the world live in peace and under the authority of God (Rev. 21:24-25). This is city as God intends city to be. And contributing to the formation of this city is what the church needs to be all about!

(Copyrighted © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)

(Cycle B Ordinary Time 31a.doc)