

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 32 Year C 2022

It is one of the gifts and blessings of the catholic faith in which we share is that all the key moments of our lives – all the significant moments, the transformative moments, the highs and lows, the passage of the year and the passage of our lives - all find expression. The catholic faith clothes our lives with meaning. The catholic faith does not shy away from the grit and grim, the drama and trauma, the ordinary and the sublime. All of it is encapsulated in one way or another. All of it the catholic faith seeks to speak to and address.

As one small example, last week we celebrated our patronal festival and so placed our journey of faith, and our belonging to the household of faith, within the much larger – indeed, eternal – context of all the holy ones of God. Our lives, our faith, are part of a much bigger story than just what we experience here in this little corner of the world in this little parish! Our story here is part of a story that crosses time and place, continent and language, culture, and history. Our little story is part of that bigger story. The faith that the saints bear witness to is the very faith we profess.

So, as we were celebrating all that last week, we were also celebrating with those being baptized and confirmed. Celebrating with them their incorporation into that bigger, eternal story. The sacraments of baptism and confirmation mark a key moment in those people's lives. A birth into faith. A maturing into faith. And the church wants to give expression to that, to mark that. It is important that the rich symbols that cloak these sacraments are given space to speak. In word and song, with a man in a funny hat and a crooked stick, in water, oil, bread, and wine, candles we seek to give meaning to these important moments. When words fail - and they do fail because they can only say so much - then the symbols kick in. The vast constellation of the church's signs and symbols are called upon to point us to the mysterious action of God in *our* lives.

So, our catholic faith, through tried and tested means, knows how to speak to these key aspects of our lives. These moments of celebration. But it is also the wisdom of the faith catholic to point us to things we would rather not think about and to avoid. The church's insistence on having to deal with the reality of sin and its harmful consequences is one of them. Another is its insistence that we be real about our deaths. Over this past week, even as we celebrated the joy and splendour of All the Saints last Sunday, without time even to draw breath, we were directed to commemorate all the faithful departed at All Souls.

But far from being a commemoration that is morbid or depressing, our faith allows us to approach our deaths, and the deaths of our loved ones *with hope*. Yes, with solemnity. Yes, with gravitas. Yes, with reverence. But ultimately with hope. The resurrection of our Lord Christ changes everything. And this change means we can look at even the most difficult aspects of our lives and have them transformed by hope.

And that, we might note, in sharp contrast to other commemorations of death this past week with the dreadful intrusion into our culture of Halloween. In our culture, we only seek to avoid or ignore the reality of death. And when we do look its way we cloak it with horror, the macabre, and with gruesome perversity. Here, the gospel of John rings true: *the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil*. The Christian message of life and of hope is defiant – *as it ever has been* - in the face of those things which seek to destroy and diminish us.

The defiant nature of hope in the face of death is apparent in the first reading today from the Second Book of Maccabees. It is one of the books of the bible written in Greek after the Hebrew parts of the Old Testament had been written and before the New Testament was written. Second Maccabees is one of seven books commonly called *deuterocanonical* which simply means ‘second canon.’ Anglicans have always held these books to be useful for teaching and edification even if no doctrine is taken from them. The New Testament writers - including the four evangelists - quote Greek translations of the Old Testament which included these seven books. They were widely known and respected at the time of our Lord.

1 and 2 Maccabees give two different accounts of the same historical event, namely the Maccabean revolt. Likely written sometime between 150 and 120 BC they recount the persecution of Jews under King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Before the reading placed before us today, we are told how Antiochus sacked Jerusalem, looted the Temple treasury, and killed and enslaved local Jews as retribution for the perceived revolt. The Temple was converted into a syncretic Greek-Jewish worship site. The king further issued decrees forbidding traditional Jewish practices, such as circumcision, keeping kosher, and keeping the Sabbath. Eleazar the scribe was then tortured and killed after refusing to eat pork. All that leads to the story set before us today and the martyrdom of seven brothers. It is truly a horrifying account and takes up all of chapter seven of this book. We have no reason to doubt its historical veracity. It was surely actions such as those described that aroused such strong resistance of the likes of Judas Maccabeus.

Chapter 7 painfully describes the torture and deaths and each of the brothers. They were scalped and fried alive, and had their hands and feet cut off. But the stand-out figure is the mother. She urged her sons to be faithful, to at the last not turn their back on their heritage and their faith, and to place their hope and trust in God alone. In fact, a few verses after the portion we hear today we are told, *'The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish in a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage.* The king, Antiochus, imagined that this woman and her children were goading him, 'treating him contempt' we are told. He sought to entice the youngest - still living - to riches and power. With the mother still encouraging her boy, he accepted death, warning Antiochus of the judgment to come. In the king's rage the boy was killed *'in manner worse than the rest'*. Then simply at the end we are told, *'last of all the mother died after her sons.'*

We could read the story of the martyrdom of the woman and her seven sons and be repulsed. We could say, was it really necessary? What's all that fuss about pork? Was that hill worth dying on? But it was stories such as these that encouraged our ancestors in faith not only in their identity but also in their faith. A faith mocked by the Sadducees in today's Gospel. And it was reflection on stories of such martyrs that led to the development of hope in eternal life. It was considering such experiences that led to belief in an afterlife such as we would recognize today. There was a sense that examples of such heroic virtue – godly virtue – could not go unrecognized by God; that God's reward for his faithful ones could not just be limited to what is experienced here and now, especially in the context of martyrdom. This hopeful expectation of course realised in God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In the Resurrection of Christ, we see that indeed death *is not* the end and that life with him *is* the reward of his faithful ones. And leads to what our Lord can assert in the gospel today, that God is not God of the dead *but of the living; for to him all are in fact alive.'*

It was looking at those stories - allowing them to be spoken, allowing them to be heard - that such ideas could be formulated. We too have our stories of heroic virtue that we too should be encouraged by and inspired by. And that brings us full circle to our celebration of All Saints: the saints who model for us the Christ life. And of the martyrs in particular who show us the price of committing to the Christ life. We can look at the challenging parts of life. But through the eyes of faith see the path of hope. Amen.