

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY YEAR B 31 OCTOBER 2021

'And the sea was no more.' These words, from today's New Testament reading, often pass us by. We're concentrating on S. John the Divine's picture of the new heaven and the new earth. God's people are depicted as 'a bride adorned for her husband': the church as the bride of Christ. Mention of a new earth challenges any idea we have that our eternal destiny is just a spiritual existence. In the creed we shall say in a few minutes we declare our faith in the 'resurrection of the body': in other words, we shall have a bodily existence, through which we relate to other people and the rest of God's creation.

The sea was no more. What does that mean? The sea in scripture is often a symbol of chaos, destruction and death. It's easy to see why. A storm at sea is something to be feared. Job asks his companions,

Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me?

Humans cannot control the sea, cannot manage the disorder it brings. But God has power over the sea. There are many references in the psalms along the lines of

He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

That's from Psalm 107.

The writer of Psalm 69 makes this plea to God:

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

So by saying 'the sea was no more', S. John is declaring that in the new heaven and earth there will be no forces that threaten life. Nothing will be opposed to God's will or the well being of those he has created.

There are various ways of defining saints. One way of looking at them is as people whose lives are ordered according to God's will. Whatever the 'sea' was in their lives has been brought under control by God's grace. What they do and what they are display the life of God. Of course they have known the pull of evil in their lives. We can think of S. Peter, who denied knowing Jesus out of fear for his own safety. It's interesting that earlier Jesus had saved Peter when he began to sink on the Sea of Galilee. Nearly 400 years later, S. Augustine of Hippo took a long time to respond to God's call. 'Late have I loved thee, O beauty both ancient and new!' he wrote.

We can learn from the saints as we go through our own struggles. It's not lessening our allegiance to Christ: it's recognising the effect he has had in the lives of others. The Elizabethan poet John

Donne, a favourite of mine, hasn't been canonised, but he has been given a feast day in the Church of England's calendar. One of his poems begins,

Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one.

We can identify with that, as so often we live with contrary impulses, feelings tugging in different directions. We're only too aware of the chaos within ourselves; we wish our lives would be rightly ordered. Or do we? Saints are people who do.

In the Apostles Creed we declare our belief in the communion of saints. It's a phrase that can be understood in several ways, depending on how wide your definition of 'saint' is. But keeping things general, in celebrating this Feast of All Saints, we are acknowledging that a community of saints exists. It's part of that great community which is God's purpose for humans and creation. The saints, part of the church, are a witness to the whole church in our own day, and therefore to the world. They're a witness to what can be, in God's purposes.

Believing in a community of saints reminds us that we're not saved on our own. The huge variety of saints means that as a church we should celebrate together our diversity. And as the saints, in their own day, served the societies they lived in, there is a call for us to be faithful to their example. By word and deed we can show that despite the chaos so apparent in our lives, and the life of the world, there is another way, God's way. It's the way where self finds its God-given identity, the intimate union with Christ described in terms of marriage. It's the way of service to others. It's a way that brings life, as surely as Jesus brought life to Lazarus and his family.