

## ALL SOULS SERMON B 2024

*Isaiah 25:6-9*

*Psalm 27*

*1 Peter 1:3-9*

*John 11:21-27*

### FR JORDAN GREATBATCH

Through the Gospel story of the raising of Lazarus today we have an insight into God's love and promise that death is not the end.

Jewish people believed that the soul remained in the vicinity of the body for three days, hoping to rejoin the body. On the fourth day, the soul finally faces reality and departs. The fact that Lazarus has been in the tomb four days means that there can be no possibility of his soul rejoining his body. Four days is shorthand for "hopeless." But the period of mourning is seven days, so the official mourning and showing of condolences are still in effect.

Jesus of course attends to the scene. And with hopelessness abounding he speaks words of life and hope. **"I am the resurrection and the life"** (v. 25). This is the heart of this Gospel lesson. While we call this story the resurrection of Lazarus, it is more importantly the revelation that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Earlier, Jesus said, "Most certainly, I tell you, the hour comes, and now is, when the dead will hear the Son of God's voice; and those who hear will live" (5:25). Now Jesus is assuring Martha that the promise has been realized—in his person. And as we gather on this Feast of All Souls and remember and pray for those, we love. We, like Martha, look to Jesus the person for hope today.

The Church often speaks of the totality of the baptised as the Communion of Saints. The word 'saints' is used in the scriptural sense of the New Testament, when it generally refers to baptised members of Christian communities.

The Communion of Saints can be said to consist of three groups. The traditional Catholic understanding is that the first are those who can properly be called 'saints', that is, those who have died and are now enjoying a face-to-face relationship with God. We sometimes call that 'heaven', but it is less a place than a relationship.

The second group are those who are living on earth at the present time, and are part of the Pilgrim Church on its way to ultimate union with God in unending happiness.

The third group are those we are remembering today. Again, in the traditional catholic understanding they are those who have died, but are not quite ready to meet God face to face. Most of us would probably acknowledge that we are far from perfect, and that we still need to go grow in holiness before entering the eternal presence of God. What that process is like, it is not for us to

speculate. Though of course the church has tried in varying degrees to explain it.

What is important for us today is that we are reminded that those who are already in the eternal presence of God, and those who are still on pilgrimage on earth can help the group we call 'Holy Souls' to reach the Vision of God sooner, through our works and prayers.

And so, although it is a "holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead", it is especially appropriate on this day. Naturally, we will remember especially family members and good friends but we should also think of those who may not have anyone to remember them. This is an important work of the church here on earth.

When our time comes to leave this world, it is the prayers of those people on whom we will depend. And so, we hold them close to our hearts this evening. As well as all those whom we love and see no longer. I am sure like me, many of you would

have loved ones who you will pray and think of this day. In a world that is increasingly uncomfortable with the notion of death, dying and grief the church can still stand as guide and light on these matters. The language used in most funerals now days is that they are a 'celebration of life'. And this is good and true. But that is not only what they are. They are also times to mourn, to allow our grief to surface and to be processed. I fear too many don't allow themselves to simply feel the grief, as painful as it is, which begins the very real human process of coming to terms with the sadness that the death of a loved one brings. And allows healing to begin.

In light of this, the Feast of All Souls is a good counter-balance to the anxiety around death and grief in our culture. Where we as a church declare that death is not the end, but a beginning of something new. It is not to be feared for God promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age.