**Sermon for All Saints Day.**  Isaiah 25:6-9 , John 11:32-44

Sunday 7st November 2021

“*We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*.” So wrote Thomas Jefferson in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

These are the truths that inspired the American revolution and however elusive they have been at times, they are the stuff of the American dream, even when that dream didn’t include everyone. What did equality mean for African Americans before the end of segregation after all? How can one be equal when many hotels and restaurants will not accept your custom, when you are not fit to even use the same drinking fountain as your co-citizens and when though you can fight for your country, voting in its elections was, for you and your kind, impossible in many places?

Though it was another dream, a dream given voice most eloquently by Martin Luther King that equality be real and lived out, and that dream acted on in the face of a violent reality finally made Jefferson’s words more real and more true.

But it isn’t truths – or even half truths – I want to address this morning, rather I would like us to think about an untruth that is widely subscribed to and it is this; we are alone. I need to explain what I mean. If I ask are we alone it might sound like a question about whether or not there is intelligent life in other places in the cosmos, a fascinating question but one quite beyond my competence to begin to answer.

When I talk about being alone I am talking about the church. So often we look at it – be that our congregation or the whole institution itself – we can feel quite alone. Things were never meant to be like this, once our church and our churches were full, once in this community and this country we counted for something. Now we seem to be shrinking, marginal and left behind. That observation may or may not be true, I suspect the truth is somewhat more nuanced than just the story of our apparent and inevitable diminution. From time to time I see stories that say things like that on the present rate of decline the last church going Anglican in England will die sometime in the middle of this century and the last Methodist will have predeceased her by a few years. I don’t buy into these stories and I would like to say that our sense of being alone, of being marginal and even irrelevant fails to see the bigger picture; one we are reminded of on All Saints Day. Today, I would argue, is an invitation to dream a little. To see beyond what might ail us as church here and now to what can be in time.

On this day we remember that we are part of a community not just in this place and at this moment in time, but part of a community which began in Jerusalem and is now in pretty much every place, which began in the wake of the death and resurrection of Jesus and will carry on – I think – in some form until the very furthest point in the human story.

Both our readings challenge us to see beyond our fear of our aloneness, our fear of our marginality and apparently inexorable slide towards irrelevance and see life and newness where there had been death and loss.

Our first reading is from the Book of Isaiah, Isaiah is a complex book. Most commentators see it as a collection of three books and out text today comes from the earliest part or proto Isaiah . However our reading is from a part which is looked upon as a later addition, an apocalyptic Isaiah. A looking towards the victory of good over evil, the world as it is called to be.

Here is a banquet for all humanity, here is the end of oppression and sadness. Here is the reign of peace, here is rejoicing.

In this late stage of the Church’s year, it ends on the Sunday before Advent, we can hear the gears of the Church year changing. These last weeks of ordinary time and then the first part of Advent cause us to look to the furthest horizon and the end of the human story. To where this text takes us.

Right now of course this seems very far away, as far away as a star t night, we might see its light but its infinitely far away. Our span is short, and whatever humanity might be in time we shall not see it. But here’s the thing, we are not alone, our story is not just this single book beginning on the day we are born and ending the day we die. It is a chapter in the whole story, the story of our unfolding humanity and more local stories of family and community.

Ken Untener wrote this, which reflects on how we are part of building something we cannot see.

 Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent
enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of
saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an
opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master
builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.*

We are invested in a dream. The church, that community we celebrate on All Saints Day, is charged with keeping this dream alive and that is a challenge. Do we have the imagination and hope to do it?

The theologian Robin Meyers writes that the premise of the gospel is that we are born into a prison of sorts and that the key to opening the prison door is “*empathetic imagination*”, the courage to imagine and dream of a different world. This empathetic imagination is the key to seeing resurrection, we heard the story of Lazarus, who Jesus restores from the dead, a story set as a kind of spoiler, a sign of the resurrection to come.

So we are a community of dreamers and seers, who claim to see what the eye does not see and to pick up the rhythm of a hope drowned out by the world’s pain.

But as Barbara Taylor Brown wrote, “ … *dreamers have fallen upon hard times, we belong to a people whose sense of reality is much more limited … we have been thought to think not to dream and have lived long enough to see many of our dreams die hard. Only saints and children still believe that dreams will come true*.”

Yet we are challenged to dream today, and to know our place in a long tradition of holy dreamers. Today we affirm and celebrate our place in that great multitude, we honour the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before and we particularly call to mind the saints known to us, those whose loving humanity, whose faithfulness and love, whose dreaming and insight have nurtured us.

But let’s not look back for too long, while grateful for all that has been we step forward into a future that will open to us in time. In doing so we shall try to live with the wisdom of dreamers and with the imagination to see beyond what is to what can be. For this is the wisdom of the saints, and we would be counted among their number Amen.