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Bandages, Burial Cloths and Glory

John 11:32-44

The Feast of All Saints/ Year B

November 1, 2009

O Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In Northern Italy, at the base of the rather charming Euganean hills, lies the ancient city of Padua. Founded, according to legend, by the Trojans in 1183 BC, the city's has born the passage of time with considerable aplomb. Her dense, arcaded streets are picturesque, emptying into beautiful plazas, one of which, the Prato della Valle, is the second largest in Europe after Moscow's Red Square. Statues by Donatello grace street corners and pedestrian islands while the artwork of Giotto, Veronese and Titian enliven the city's churches and chapels with a uniquely Renaissance flare. With so much artistic brilliance to choose from, one is tempted, at least initially, to stroll pass Padua's main cathedral. The church's façade is plain and nondescript. There are no gothic ornaments and flying buttresses of which to speak. The ornate carvings one often finds over cathedral doors are absent. Only when entering the church's baptistery is one suddenly overtaken by a sense of awe. Above the visitor, on the baptistery's domed ceiling, is a magnificent fresco painted by Giusto de Menabuoi. In the middle of the scene is an image of Christ. His eyes stare penetratingly down at the worshipper below. In concentric circles, radiating outward from the Messiah, are images of the saints of God. Their number seems to ever-expand down the curvature of the dome. They appear watchful, encouraging and inescapable. Their very presence seems determined to draw one's gaze upward toward heaven, to reorient the worshipper toward some heroic height. The eyes of the numerous saints reflect a strange mixture of intimacy and aloofness as if they are at one with us and yet forever calling us out of ourselves. Our modern tendency is to think of saints as out-of-this-world holy people who are far beyond our own experience or outside the sense of our own goodness. We confine them to ages past and to places remote and far away. We often see them as one-dimensional as if they are images painted on a baptistery ceiling when in fact they are, quite often, ordinary people just like you and me complete with all of our complexities.

On the surface today's reading from John's gospel has nothing to do with saints at all. Though as we will soon discover it has more to say to us than at first glance. One of the worst experiences that anyone can have, is getting that phone call in the middle of the night that tells us something has happened. Or in the case of Jesus and the disciples, a letter. By the flickering of the fire light, the Lord and his followers read every word. The senders of the letter, Mary and Martha, could not have been more clear and clean-cut in their prose, their brother Lazarus is ill. The one who Jesus loved is ill. To the sisters' credit, the letter contains no request for the Lord to come, just a statement of fact. That would be enough. The disciples know of their Master's strong affection for the sisters and their brother. So they quite naturally, begin to gather their belongings for the journey to Bethany. The Lord will want to set out immediately, they think. Surprisingly, they are wrong. Jesus response to the letter is almost glib and equally to the point. "The disease isn't fatal" He says.

Perplexed, the disciples drop their sleeping bags and unroll their tents yet again. A day passes and then another and all they do is sit there beyond the Jordan. The letter seems to tick its way toward an explosion. Finally and calmly, Jesus says “Let’s go back to Judea” And so they go.

Their journey along the hot dusty roads is uneventful. Their conversation somewhat cryptic. The disciples seem to be preoccupied with the possibility of Jesus and probably themselves being stoned. Apparently, an unappreciative crowd had tried it once before. Jesus, on the other hand, is rattling on about how their friend Lazarus has fallen asleep and needs to be woken up. How absolutely thoughtless? After all everyone knows that sick people need their rest. The disciples it seems have managed to miss the boat yet again, though who can blame them this time. They are somewhat mystified until Jesus spells it out for them. “Lazarus has died”.

Upon walking into Bethany, Jesus and the disciples encounter one of the most pitiful and poignant scenes in all of scripture. The entire town is in anguish and mourning. Lazarus, beloved brother and neighbor, has been in the ground for four days. According to Jewish custom, this meant that Lazarus had begun to rot and his soul had departed. In other words, Lazarus was deader than a door nail and there was nothing which was going to change that fact. They are greeted first by Martha and then Mary. The sisters use the same heart-rending phrase. “Lord, if you had been here than my brother wouldn’t have died. Their words contain no judgment, no accusation. Just a shocked resignation to the fact that things could have been different. Their grief is unbelievably real, you know the kind, when the pain hurts so bad that you wish the tears would come and they don’t. When your anguish leaves your face slack, your eyes clouded and the world shrouded in a dense fog. Jesus looks upon them and weeps. He weeps for Lazarus, for Mary and Martha, for anyone and everyone who suffers. He weeps tears of sympathy yes, but also tears of anger, anger at what death has done, and at what death will continue to do. And if death knew any better, it would have run screaming as soon as those tears began to fall. Looking upon Jesus’ tears, the crowd could not be more human. Some of them are heard mumbling “He must have loved Lazarus deeply” while still others murmured about how if Jesus had really loved him than he wouldn’t have let this happen. He opened the eyes of a blind man, surely he could do something here.

It is then that Mary and Martha lead Jesus to the tomb. And he stands there and stares at the heavy slab of stone, at the permanence of death. His eyes reddened from tears as much as from anger. And then Jesus says the unthinkable: “Remove the stone” You can almost see the shocked expressions on everyone’s faces, not to mention the curling of noses at the thought of the atrocious smell of a decaying corpse. Even Martha is a little taken aback. “There’s going to be a stench, Lord,” she says. “He’s been in there four days.” Jesus turns and looks her square in the eye, looks us in the eye too. “Hey, didn’t I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God. Roll the stone away”

The stone is removed and Jesus in a loud voice, a voice as strong as a thousand thunders yells: “Lazarus, come out!” The crowds, some believing, some simply wondering, stare into the inky blackness of the tomb and pinch their noses. And then the

air changes, it grows heavy and seems to crackle with electricity. The smell of death is gone and deep within the shadows of the tomb. Is that movement? Yes, it is movement. And then to everyone's amazement and perhaps even a bit of horror, out stumbles Lazarus, bandages, burial clothes and all. Blinking into the light of a spring afternoon, that could have gone on forever. Jesus final words: "Unwrap him and let him go"

An amazing and wondrous story, but what does it have to do with our celebration of All Saints. A whole lot. You see, John's gospel is concerned with signs, with Jesus performing miracles that point to even greater truth. And the raising of Lazarus is just such a miracle. It is a miracle by which, as the Lord said, we would see the glory of God. How do we see it? Only through Lazarus stumbling from the tomb. Anything short of that and we would still remain blind. When Jesus shouts "Lazarus, come out" its as if he shouted "Lazarus, show them my glory" and Lazarus does. He answers Jesus call to enter new life, to leave the tomb. And isn't that what each and everyone one of us is all called to do. To shine forth the glory of God in our lives through our response to the Lord's call. Isn't this what the saints of blessed memory did. You see their sainthood consists less of what they have done than of what God for some reason has chosen to do through them. Saints are less like cold cathedral statues than they are like panes of stained glass which the light of God's glory passes through to illumine the dark world around them in vibrant color. And you know, we can be saints too. If Saint Lazarus can stumble into the daylight like a Halloween mummy. If Saint Mary Magdalene can be possessed by seven devils. If Saint Augustine can pray "Give me chastity and continence but not now" If Francis of Assisi can carry on conversation with birds and Joseph of Cupertino, the so-called flying friar, has to be hauled out of trees from where his prayers left him dangling then you figure there's no one who God can't use to show his glory. Not even you or me. Today we remember saints, the well-known and not-so-well-known, the far-off and the ones who gave us breath. Their lives are witnesses. And I say "are" because they are not dead. They are very much alive and their lives teach us what it means to live. They are so possessed by an internal vision of divine goodness that they give us a glimpse of the face of God in the very center of our own humanness. They show us the possibilities of greatness within ourselves. They are the ones, who invites us, like Lazarus, to taste Resurrection and discover that we can't get enough of it.