Sermon

All Saints/All Souls

3/11/19

Eltham

**Readings**

**Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18**

Psalm 149

**Ephesians 1.11-23**

Gospel: **Luke 6.20-31**

+FSHS

Maybe I’m becoming an old fogey, and maybe it’s a sign that I am of a particular generation and now occupying a space that my parents’ and my grandparents’ generations inhabited before me. But I find myself flicking through TV channels and thinking, “my goodness this stuff is vacuous”. I have a Netflix subscription (mostly because that’s how I can follow Star Trek Discovery!), and I’ve watched (binged) many different types of shows and movies. And I observe that much of what passes for entertainment is empty and ephemeral, and in some cases, downright disgusting and damaging: Gogglebox (a TV show about people watching TV), the Bachelor and the Bachelorette, Love Island, even Survivor and many of the reality TV shows which these days are produced to within an inch of their lives in order to tell a particular story, and are not “reality” at all. In which the people or contestants are commodities to be shaped, used and abused by the tellers of the story.

It begs the question of what is real, and probably points to one of the existential crises in our culture: what is truth? What is truth, in an age when we can’t trust media outlets to report facts, but a slanted version of “fake news”? When magazines don’t actually report on the lives of celebrities, but are a variety of fan-fiction, taking pictures of the celebrity of the week, and photoshopping it to suggest so and so is pregnant, starving and wasting away, or stacking on the pounds, or on the brink of divorce? When politicians promise something, and deliver its opposite? When those in community leadership obfuscate because in the background they’re being paid big dollars by mining companies and other lobby groups? What is real? What is true? What can we depend on? Perhaps our entertainment as a manifestation of our culture acts as commentary on it.

What it does suggest is that there’s a potent mix of fear, nihilism, anxiety, and disconnection which drives rampant materialism in a futile search to fill the bottomless void. The swing to the right we’ve seen sweeping the world, the swing towards defensive nationalism, towards concrete certainties and black and white thinking, towards a politics of exclusion – all of this stems from fear. And fear of the other is fundamentally about a fear that at heart we are nobody and nothing and all is meaningless.

All that’s pretty depressing (and on one level you would be justified in questioning whether my observations about the fluidity of how we define reality, reflect reality). It’s what hovers in the background, though, as I reflect on today’s gospel reading, and on the feast of All Saints/All Souls which we observe today.

In the gospel reading we hear from Jesus’ sermon on the plain, Luke’s version of Matthew’s sermon on the mount. Once again we hear how his living of the realm of God, his vision of the realm of God, turns reality on its head and invites people to see and experience God’s reality, God’s realm. The culture of self-indulgent excess in which we are surrounded is not new: it was similar in the time Luke’s gospel was being written and disseminated, and Jesus’ vision of the realm of God both cuts through its fog, and presents something hopeful and new. The realm of God belongs to the poor; the hungry will be filled in God’s realm; those who weep will laugh; those who are persecuted because they’ve thrown their lot in with Jesus will be happy, leaping and dancing for joy in the midst of it. Why? Because the realm of God is so absurd: it means loving enemies and doing good to those who hate; it means blessing those who curse, and praying for them; it means not answering violence with violence, and not jealously guarding one’s possessions; it means being generous to beggars and if anyone steals from you, not seeking redress; it means treating others as you’d like to be treated: with love, dignity, and respect. That was radical for Jesus’ day, and it’s just as radical in our day.

Because if we’re honest, the woes he also pronounces strike a little uncomfortably close to home. It’s important to note that the word translated as “woe” is not about curse or damnation. No one is going to be damned just because they’re rich and enjoy a good life. The word *ouia*, is better rendered “beware” or “watch out” or “look out!” or like the German “Achtung!” So Jesus warns those who are rich and living comfortably, those who have plenty to eat and don’t know their need, those who are laughing vacuously to hide an empty soul, those who are spoken of well and preen with the attention. Attachment to all of these things is what keeps people from entering the realm of God. The realm of God is not (just) a future promise, but something to be experienced in the here and now. It’s a glorious hope, something which fills the hungry with good things, which brings blessing and community, the love of God made concrete and eternally real, in contrast with the nihilistic and anxiety-driven indulgence of the society of the day. The realm of God brings people together and transforms the world and society; the ways of worldly power bring destruction, exploitation, isolation, and ultimately death. Jesus’ followers are to live lives caught up in this vision of the realm of God which fuels their hope, their care, their compassion, their passion for justice and work to see it done.

What do we do with this, and what does it have to do with All Saints/All Souls?

All Saints/All Souls is a reminder to us that we belong to the realm of God in which those who have died in faith are in the hand of God and therefore not lost to us. It reminds us we are in continuity with those who have faithfully lived the realm of God in their time and place – and that we are the carriers of the torch, those who are called to embody the realm of God in our time and place. It reminds us that all those who seek to follow Jesus are united in the love of God’s realm, and together have access to the freedom from the burden of worry and anxiety God gives us in relationship with God. This is the good news that Jesus inaugurates and embodies, and which we as those who are caught up in him also are invited to live.

And that’s where joy takes off. We’re invited to be in touch with our need for God. To acknowledge and place in God’s hands our fears and anxieties, including our anger, hatred and desire to get even with people. To realize that our identity is God-given, and not something we have to generate for ourselves, but something to be accepted – and therefore to accept the God-given identity of others. Because we know without shadow of a doubt that we are loved, united with Jesus in his life, death, resurrection, we have the capacity to love without limits. To pray for those who hate and curse us – or who are indifferent to the message of good news. To resist, yes, and to seek justice – without violence. To live this radical realm of God’s love without apology or fear, and by our lives to commend it to those who are lost within the emptiness, nihilism, and despairing fear so prevalent around us. That we may all be drawn into the fellowship of God’s holy ones, God’s saints.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**