

All Saints Day 7 November , 2010 Bob Partlow

I won't ask for a show of hands, but I hope that all of you feel blessed today. The Greek word used in Luke's "Sermon on the plain" which is translated as "blessed" is *makarios*. It is also used to mean "happy". But today we are celebrating "All Saints Day"? So what does sainthood have to do with blessedness or happiness? I thought the saints were those who were thrown to the lions and burned at the stake...or blown up in a church in Iraq. And when I have mourned the death of loved ones and I never felt either blessed or happy!

What's going on here? It is enough to drive a fundamentalist or literalist nuts! The Greek word for "saint" is *hagaios*. It has been twisted over time to convey the identity of someone who is a Christian superstar. But a saint really is someone who is "in Christ"...someone through whom an experience of Christ has revealed to them the unending love of God from which we are never separated. Notice how often Paul uses the phrase "In Christ" or "In him" in our reading from Ephesians (1:11-23).

I am blessed when I mourn because I know that the one I mourn remains now and eternally in the presence and love of God. So All Saints Day is really a time to remember those who have died yet are "in Christ" and never die. You are all saints! Do you believe that? I don't ever expect anyone to ever call me "Christ like".....but I know that I am "in Christ" so I also am a saint....and because of that I am blessed in good times and bad....even when I do not feel it.

Actually, every celebration of the Eucharist is a celebration of all saints day. Hear these words from Eucharistic Prayers A & B which follow the “Proper Preface”: *Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven who forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your name.*” They are all here gathered around this table at every Eucharist!

So I want to use today as an opportunity to speak about the recognition of our mortality and the reality of death. I do not want to judge or criticize how anyone mourns the death of a loved one.....that is most personal and not for me to judge. If the family just wants to invite friends to Bill’s favorite bar for a few drinks and share remembrances.....so be it. If they want to gather at his favorite fishing hole and spread his ashes....OK by me.

But the Episcopal Church and the Anglican tradition have a way to mark death that I commend to you to at least be aware of and understand. I invite you to open your BCP to page 490 and follow with me:

- First of all it is called The Burial of the Dead.....not of those who have “passed on”.... “departed this life” .... “Gone to be with the Lord”: or whatever euphemism we may use instead. Note that in the BCP it follows prayers for the healing of the sick and prayers for use at the time of death.

As Episcopalians we are radically incarnational and do not deny the reality and inevitability of death.

- Note also it says that Christians are properly buried “from the church”. Funeral homes have a purpose, but the burial service should if possible be conducted from the church and lead to the grave.
- Please turn also to the notes on page 507. Note that it is an Easter celebration with focus on the resurrection of the dead...it is not primarily a remembrance of the deceased. (Sometimes we take this too far. There is the story of the man who was late for a lunch appointment. He apologized to his lunch partner saying that he had unexpectedly had to attend a funeral at the local Episcopal Church. Oh, the other person said, How was it? The man responded “It was a beautiful service but it was not really clear as to who had died”!). So the focus is resurrection but we do need to reflect on the one who has died and as the notes say...the joy of resurrection does not make grief unchristian. I have wept at many funerals.
- Although it is not required, the BCP service is designed to be conducted surrounding the celebration of Eucharist. I personally find special comfort in those words in the Eucharist: *Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with*

*Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven who forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your name.*

All the company includes those who have died...including the one whose funeral we are conducting!

- What is called “The Proper Preface” states the special focus of the Eucharist. On most Sundays it is one of three focused on either the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit. They are found starting on page 377. But the one on page 382 for use at the Eucharist for the Commemoration of the Dead. Has the phrase that I include and repeat in every burial homily “to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended”. Life is changed, not ended ---To me living with that faith is what it means to be “in Christ”.

I strongly urge all people of a certain age to plan your service, write it down for your family and/or put it on file with the parish.

I have three firm requirements for mine: (1) It will be conducted in an Episcopal Church, (2) it will include a celebration of Eucharist and (3) the final hymn will be the Navy Hymn during which I will expect everyone to sing loudly, with a smile on their face and at least a few tears in their eyes.