

Homily for All Souls

November 2, 2009

Reading 1

Wis 3:1-9

The souls of the just are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them.

They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
and their passing away was thought an affliction
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.

But they are in peace.

For if before humanity, indeed, they be punished,
yet is their hope full of immortality;
chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed,
because God tried them
and found them worthy of Godself.

As gold in the furnace, God proved them,
and as sacrificial offerings God took them to Godself.

In the time of their visitation they shall shine,
and shall dart about as sparks through stubble;
they shall judge nations and rule over peoples,
and the Lord shall be their King forever.

Those who trust in God shall understand truth,
and the faithful shall abide with God in love:
because grace and mercy are with God's holy ones,
and God's care is with the elect.

I was grading papers this weekend, and in one of them a student made the observation that he thought Christianity highly privileged verbal / linguistic forms of intelligence.

I don't know about that. Perhaps Protestants do? At least historically? But even here at Luther Seminary – particularly over the past few weeks of chapel – I think you can detect the richness of the musical tradition that Lutherans can draw on.

Regardless, I *know* that Roman Catholics have always been analogical Christians. The Catholic intellectual tradition is rich in analogical forms of thought, and our popular religious practices have always been deeply embodied, physical, incarnational.

Which brings me to today's commemoration. Today is All Soul's Day in the Roman Catholic calendar. I want to make sure to point out that we ALSO celebrate All Saints' Day, as we did yesterday. So we have two days in our liturgical cycle, and I think sometimes people in Protestant and Reform contexts are not always aware of the distinctions.

Why do we need two? Well, in part because we have a rich tradition of saints – which includes a very specific canonical procedure for identifying and verifying them as saints—and that has meant that when we want to express our longing for all those we love who have died, we need something in addition to the celebration of All Saints. Because we're very aware that our family members and friends are not saints in that sense of the word.

But I think it's also because we feel a vivid connection to the *communion of saints*, in the basic Christian meaning of that term, and we need a time to commemorate our deep sense that we are still connected to those who have died, still in community, in communion with them.

Catholics, as I noted, are analogical people. And we express our beliefs in embodied practices. The culmination of those beliefs is of course Eucharist, which we celebrate as often as we can. But there are many smaller practices – we call them sacramentals, instead of sacraments – that punctuate and enliven our daily practices. Processions, home shrines, stories and songs of faith, these are all ways by which we live our beliefs from Monday to Saturday, as well as on Sunday.

The Catholic community is also a global one, with various parts of the community “holding in trust” specific forms of these practices, specializing in them, if you will. The two days that are All Saints and All Souls -- particularly the darkness and midnight hours between the two days – are celebrated in Mexico and certain parts of the southwest US, as “el dia de los muertos” or the Day of the Dead. During this time families will gather together to visit the graves of loved ones, and very often will build small home shrines, or *ofrendas*, in which to specially commemorate their dead. But it is also a time of celebration and festival, where people shout and laugh at death, and live into the Christian belief that we are born in death into eternal life through the grace of Jesus Christ.

I realize that the Day of the Dead has taken on a certain kind of commercial fascination, but perhaps those of you who celebrate Christmas will recognize that it’s still possible to hold to the Christian content to be found here.

One of the hymns that we often sing in my home church, which echoes to me at this time of year, has words that go like this:

We remember how you loved us to your death.
And still we celebrate for you are with us here.
And we believe that we will see you, when you come,
In your glory Lord.

We remember,
We celebrate,
We believe.

And so on “el dia de los muertos” we celebrate.

The Day of the Dead is a time each year when we can feel the veil between the spaces of death and life grow particularly thin. When the days grow short, the nights grow long, the leaves and the flowers and the growing things around us die, or go into dormancy, we are ever more aware of the shortness and fragility of our own lives.

Kathryn Schifferdecker quoted Ellen Davis in a sermon earlier this quarter. Ellen said of Proverbs that it is: "a spiritual guide for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch.”

I think the Wisdom of Solomon, from which today’s text comes, could also be read in that manner. As a book of practical wisdom.

As we heard moments ago,

“The souls of the just are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them.

They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
and their passing away was thought an affliction
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.

But they are in peace.

For if before humanity, indeed, they be punished,
yet is their hope full of immortality;

chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed,
because God tried them
and found them worthy of Godself.”

It is this belief that we hold close to us, that we commemorate, in the day of All Souls. Yes, Wisdom is a text – a text that Protestants do not view as canonical and a text that can be used to justify a concept like purgatory – but it is also a text that reminds us that though we might feel afflicted by the death of our loved ones, or indeed by death in general, we need to be comforted by the hope God gives us uniquely through Jesus Christ, that we will indeed be reunited with them, that death is overcome through the love of God.

It is this sense, of the thinness of the veil that separates us from our dead, of our deep connection to and longing for, those who have passed beyond it ahead of us, that we mark today.

“Those who trust in God shall understand truth,
and the faithful shall abide with God in love:”

This we remember, this we celebrate, this we believe.

amen.