

**+ St. Michael's, 31 Oct. 10**

As I walk by the houses in our neighbourhood these past few days I have seen some curious sights. A number of front yards are dotted with grave stones, some front doors are adorned with hanging skeletons, and there are odd assortments of “ghoulies and ghosties” to be seen. I wonder what recent immigrants from other cultures must think of this annual custom that looks, on the surface, like a whimsical festival of death. Along with these scenes I noticed a review of a new movie by Clint Eastwood in the paper a few days ago. The movie is called “Hereafter” and is Eastwood’s examination of what can be learned from near death experiences. He said to the reviewer, “Everybody is curious about an afterlife, even if

they don’t believe it, you are still curious about it.” And why is this? I suppose because we know that all of our life stories here on earth will one day come to an end. What happens after that?

This theme is reflected in our yearly round of worship. November has been known by Christians as “the month of the dead” because it begins with the feast of All Saints’, moves on to All Souls’ day, and includes, for some countries, Remembrance Day when we recall those who have died in the wars of the last century or so. At the same time we are conscious that much of nature around us is apparently dying as the cold of winter approaches.

**Let us look at his theme for a few minutes as we consider what our faith can teach us about death.**

**First, perhaps, we need a reminder that we cannot learn very much about death using the methods of science. Science can tell us about the decomposition of the body, but if we believe that our experience of earthly life is more than just the physical body, and that it also includes such qualities as love, trust, hope, courage etc., we cannot measure these either here or hereafter. It seems that for both science and religion we must rely on what we call faith when speculating about the future life. I do not want to devalue the work of modern science that has discovered so many of the gifts that lie**

**hidden in the natural world, nor do I want to deny the extraordinary experiences of those people who have known a “near death” event. But we are still left with a huge mystery that we will all, one day, face. Here are three considerations:**

**First, we can look at the great Feast Day that falls tomorrow in the Christian calendar. The early church often referred to the death of fellow believers as their “birthday into heaven”, and they delighted in describing all the faithful as “saints”. There are, of course, the great heroes of our faith who have shown us, often at the price of their lives, how to follow Jesus. Some of these now have their own holy day in the Christian year. But All Saints’ Day**

invites us to celebrate all those folk who have taught us, by their faithful living, what it means to follow the values of Jesus. These folk may not be widely known, or appreciated by others, but we know them as people who have given us a glimpse of God's goodness and love. One English mystic of the last century said, "All Saints' Day is the feast of the saintly moment, the saintly bit, the evidence of sanctity in those people who are otherwise not saints at all." These are the people who have been dear to us in their time on earth, people whom we have loved "warts and all". I think we can learn here from the aboriginal peoples of our continent who revere "the ancestors" and invite them, somewhat as we will do this morning, to be present with them when they assemble. Let us

not be neglectful in praying for our loved ones who have died, asking that God's mercy may be upon them, and also that their prayers may still be with us, encouraging us to live in God's ways.

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Secondly, we know, even when thinking of our own acquaintances, that there are some whose lives have not been lived well, but have tended more toward selfishness and destructive behaviour. We probably know that our own lives have included some of that behaviour as well. What happens to all this at the time of death? It is a question that raises the uncomfortable prospect of judgement. We may not all agree precisely on one moral code, but it seems all humans of sound mind recognize the need for moral evaluations in human life. The

philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said he was convinced of God by “the starry heavens above me, and the moral law within me.” It is this moral law, and the struggle of good and evil within us that has suggested to people of faith that there is an aspect of judgement that goes beyond the end of our earthly life. Jesus often spoke of this judgement in his teaching. An example would be the parable known as “The rich man and Lazarus”. During his life on earth the rich man ignored the beggar Lazarus who was at his gate. After death the rich man is tormented in Hades while Lazarus sits in paradise at the side of Abraham. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to help him, but Abraham replies; “Remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and

Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.” (Lk. 16).

The life of Jesus speaks to us of both Judgement and Mercy, and it is the knowledge of these that gives us our deepest sense of purpose and meaning in our living. Too much judgement alone leads only to paralyzing fear. But when balanced with mercy, we are given freedom to venture and to risk mistakes and failure, as long as we aim to follow the will of our Creator.

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Thirdly, there is the matter of Presence. In the end the fundamental promise to us in the Gospel is a promise of Presence. In this earthly life we are called, as followers of Jesus, to build

our lives, and to build a society, in which the presence of God's love for creation is known and honoured. And, when this life ends, the promise is similar – that we will be called into the presence of our Lord. So the risen Jesus says to the apostles, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations .... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The resurrection of Jesus is a promise to us of that presence that cannot be severed even by death. And the resurrection also assures us that we will know the presence of Jesus when our earthly life is done. "I have prayed to the Father", says Jesus, "that where I am, you may be also."

The Bible gives us a number of pictures that act as pointers or hints of what we might expect. But, whether our image of the hereafter is the mansion with many rooms, a throng of harpists around a throne, or the great heavenly banquet, the central message of all is that we will find ourselves in the Presence of the one we now worship and follow. It is that presence that feeds us now, and invites us to everlasting life with him --- "preserve your body and soul unto everlasting life".

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Let us use this annual feast of All Saints to remember not only the great and near-great saints of all the faith traditions of the world, but also those people we have known personally who have shown us a bit of God's

**goodness and loving-kindness – a bit of God’s presence – and let us pray that we may so live our lives that we will express that presence in the way we live now, and know that everlasting presence in the world to come.**