

Last Sunday night after going home from Queen's Park Singers Rehearsal I sat and watched the next Episode of Doctor Who which had been on while I was at choir. You may have noticed over the last 5 years, that I love Dr Who, and I considered not going to choir when I realised the new series was going to be on a Sunday Night.

On Sunday I say I watched the episode, in fact I cried my way through it. It was both beautiful and confronting as the Doctor and her companions try to stop a space villain from the future distorting history. Someone is trying to stop the moment when Rosa Parks sat down on a bus in Montgomery and changed history.

I don't want to spoil the episode for anyone, but there is a moment when the young people travelling with the Doctor are talking about the change Rosa Parks single action has on history, and did it make the difference. The Doctor observed that for Rosa in fact very little changed in her life time, or in her quality of life for many many years, but for those who followed Rosa, it changed the world – and not just the world the universe, as the Doctor opens the Tardis doors and they view an Asteroid named Rosa Parks.

It was a moving episode on many levels, but this notion of a single small action which changes the world was quite interesting. On top of this, we don't always know that when we have that action, or make that decision that it is in fact that small thing that brings about change. I am tempted to quote Harry Potter at this point – but I won't!

Today is All Saints Day, a Day when we remember those who have formed us and changed us. Saints are those who, like Rosa have changed the world, or history or the lives of others through their actions in faith. But last Sunday reminded me that so often Saint's didn't know they were Saints when a small action or a small chance changed their lives forever, and often the lives of others as well!

All Saint's Day, is an opportunity for the Church to honour all saints, known and unknown. While we have information about many saints, and we honour them on specific days, there are many unknown or unsung saints, who may have been forgotten, or never been honoured specifically. On All Saints Day, we celebrate these holy men and women, and ask for their prayers.¹

The concept of All Saints Day is connected to the doctrine of The Communion of Saints. This is the concept that all of God's people, on heaven and earth are spiritually connected and united. Saints are not divine, nor omnipresent or omniscient. However, because of our common communion with and through Jesus Christ, our prayers are joined with the heavenly community of Christians.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 350) testifies to this belief:

¹ <http://www.churchyear.net/allsaints.html>

We mention those who have fallen asleep: first the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition...(Catechetical Lecture 23:9).

Our understanding of prayer, is at the heart of our understanding of the saints, a constant conversation of all who believe with God – it is quite a beautiful image and it has been part of the Christian tradition since the 2nd century.

With this in mind it is no surprise then that the reading we have today is that of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The story gathers us around a newly occupied tomb, surrounded by the typical mix of grief and loss, accusation and anger.

In that unlikely setting, Jesus tells Martha that she will see the glory of God (John 11:40). We know what it is to long for a glimpse of that glory, perhaps especially at times reflected in the scenes of John 11.

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember the long line of the faithful who have come before us, whom we honour and treasure. Yet we may also wonder just where we see God's glory in a procession that always ends up at a death. We know from experience how death, with all its earthly processes, stinks as Martha put it . Where is it that we glimpse God's glory?²

“The dead man came out” (John 11:44). It would be difficult to imagine a more unlikely sentence. This is utterly beyond our experiences. We've been given plenty of indication earlier in John 11 about what will happen, but we may still be startled by the man shuffling out of the tomb, unexpectedly alive. Surely such a miracle is where the glory of God blazes forth. Accept that doesn't seem to happen in the text. Although some believe because of what they saw (verse 45), others begin to plan how to kill both Jesus (verse 53) and Lazarus. And yet in many ways it is not Lazarus healing which is the miracle here, but more fully it plays as the part of a climax point in Jesus ministry. It is the promise of what is to come – that is a sign of Jesus own death and resurrection.

Did the disciples, or even Lazarus, Mary or Martha have any sense of the power of what they had just seen? Yes their faith was stronger, and later, much later they well have reflected on its similarities with the rising of Jesus from the tomb which they later encounter. But at that moment, did they know or understand that everything had changed for ever as a result of what had happened?

We rarely fully know the consequences of our actions, sometimes we can see an immediate action or reaction to something we do – but often we don't know how we influence others around us.

When I was a child we went to church each Sunday, and a few rows in front of us sat Mr and Mrs Hyland – they were the oldest people I knew – and they reminded me of

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3849

the Little Old Man and the Little Old Women in a book my Mum would read to me at night – in hindsight they probably were only in there early 70s at the time, though I knew Mr Highland till he was 99! He had a giant walnut tree we used to climb in and every year it seemed to yield enough walnuts for the whole congregation!

I was inspired by Mr Highland, he had the most amazing base singing voice, and knew parts to all the hymns. He had a gentle smile, and seemed to be always interested in us when we were small. But what inspired me most was that he came to church with his bible, and he always came early and sat and prayed. He seemed to me to live as he believed. But watching him pray each Sunday, that simple action, inspired me to do the same. His action may not have changed the world, but it changed me. His gentleness and kindness and strength were a combination which was a mystery to me.

I didn't know it at the time, but since I have read the words of St Cyril, I am reminded of Mr Highland, not divine nor omnipresent – but spiritually connected on heaven and earth.

Jesus in the raising of Lazarus, and then in his own resurrection connects heaven and earth spiritually. But this is often embodied in others around us as well. What connects us spiritually – not only with heaven and earth – but with each other.

The beautiful passage we heard from Revelation this morning, a vision of a new heaven and a new earth where all is transformed and hopeful. It captures a vision of the fullness of life, in this world and in the next. The saints are not a quick fix end to death or pain. They do not take away our responsibility for living, but remind us that we each have a responsibility – and that in our actions we too may change the lives of the of others, as those who have gone before us. We may never know.

The vision of Jesus connecting heaven and earth in one small action call us to prayer – for the world and for one another. It calls us to notice each other, and our neighbours and to know that we are all welcome at the table of God. It is intended to be for us both a vision of hope and an inspiration to our prayer. I hope as we celebrate today we may be inspired by the Saints, but to also notice that we too have a Saints job to fulfil. Amen.