

The Dead Living and the Living Dead

In the name of him who will wipe away every tear from our eyes, dear friends in Christ: All Hallow's Eve – or *Halloween* as it's better known among us – was just a couple of nights ago. It's a rather strange holiday when you think about it, especially as it's observed in this nation. Over the years our society has managed to cobble together the traditions of at least a dozen different cultures, and to that we've added our own uniquely American twists—not to mention in more recent years a heavy dose of commercialism (which I suppose also represents the American way of life). But what is Halloween a celebration of exactly? Jack-o-lanterns and black cats, mummies and vampires, ghouls, ghosts, and goblins ... pretty much all things dark and macabre. Hardly sounds like the sort of thing anyone would want to celebrate. But then again, that's the point, isn't it? It's all done rather tongue-in-cheek. It's an elaborate spoof on these things that people *used to* fear, but that we know now is mostly just a bunch of silly superstition. Even the darker elements, the themes of death, Satan, and witchcraft – we know these things have all been defeated by Christ so that we need not fear them either. And so through some of our Halloween practices we can make fun of them; and we can have fun while doing it.

Which is why it is also that people (some people anyway) can enjoy other forms of dark humor and fright. From plays like *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a very funny story about two older women who enjoy poisoning people, to the musical *Little Shop of Horrors*, which features a man-eating plant that sings and I suppose you could say dances, to bloody horror films like *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* (both of which have at least a dozen sequels), the reason people can enjoy them is that they know that what they're seeing isn't real. If they thought for a moment any of it were real, no one would find it entertaining. And it's at this time every year that a lot of television channels show a lot of those horror classics presumably to get people in the proper Halloween mood. With that in mind, the title of today's sermon, *The Dead Living and the Living Dead*, sounds like it could be one of them. I assure you, it's not; but it does have something in common with your typical horror movie. What's that? Just this: a lot of what you see isn't real. The difference is I'm not talking about a fictional story. I'm talking about the way we perceive the real world: we don't see it the way it actually is.

For example, as you go about your business every day you come into contact with all kinds of people. You see them walking around, talking, driving their cars, sometimes driving their cars and talking on their phones at the same time (which is probably not a good idea). Anyway, they're doing what people do. And as they're doing it they certainly seem to be full of life. They're breathing, their hearts are beating, there's brain activity going on (although in some cases you may have doubts about *that* one); but every indication is that they're alive. The reality, however, is quite different. We know that for certain because the One who defines reality, Jesus, says so in this morning's Gospel. In fact, because he doesn't want us to skip by what he says too lightly or make the mistake of thinking that he's only speaking figuratively, he prefaces his words with the formula "Truly, truly I say to you". It's his way of saying, "I know this will directly contradict what you believe, think, and see; but this is the way it really is".

And what follows are these words: “an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” What’s he talking about? Well, at first brush it may seem that he’s referring to the resurrection on the Last Day; but he specifically says that the time is “now here” already when he said it, which rules out the Last Day because that’s a future event. A second guess might be to think that he’s talking about that handful of dead persons that he raised to life during his earthly ministry; but that isn’t the idea either because he says that the time in question is both now and is yet to come – which means that it will continue for some time after his ministry. No, what he’s talking about are people who hear his Gospel and come to faith in him. These are the dead who are being brought to life.

Which is really quite astonishing. As Christians, we would all agree that it’s wonderful when someone comes to the faith. “There is rejoicing among the angels of heaven” we’re told. But I wonder how often we see or appreciate it for the full miracle that it is: the coming to life of one who was dead – for that is the way Jesus describes it. Which means that so many of those people we see going about their business, the majority of them in fact, aren’t really alive at all. They are really nothing more than animated corpses: the living dead.

You see, life, real life from the Lord’s point of view, has nothing to do with whether you’re breathing, or your heart is beating. It’s defined instead as being in a proper relationship with the Lord who is the source of all life. To be more specific, it’s being in right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. If you have such a relationship you are alive quite independent of the mechanics of biology because you are plugged into the source of life. If you don’t have that, then you are dead even while you live. Sure, you may be still moving around and what not; but it’s more like being a wind-up toy: the spring keeps running down, and one day it will stop for good. But whether it’s running or not, spiritually speaking there’s nobody home—or to be more precise, the “body” that’s home is corpse. But when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which is active in the Word of Christ’s Gospel as it is shared, faith emerges in the heart of someone who was formerly an unbeliever, that faith is held by a new and living soul that has been created and breathed into that person by God. It’s not at all unlike what he did for the lifeless hunk of clay that was Adam when he was first formed. It truly is the miracle of giving life. And I wonder if many of us wouldn’t be more enthusiastic about evangelism and mission work if we truly understood it that way. I mean, if I were to hold a class on how to share the Gospel I would likely be underwhelmed by the turnout. But suppose I offered instead a class on how you could learn to be the Lord’s instrument to help raise the dead?

So, it matters immensely the words we chose and the way we understand things, which leads me to another perception problem we have. This one concerns those people we know who have died in the faith. Typically, we say they’re dead – or we use euphemisms like “passed on”, “passed away” or “deceased”. (That last term I’ve never understood. Seems to me that if someone’s dead they’d be “ceased”. *De*-ceased sounds like they’re up and running again. Anyway,) if the person who died wasn’t very close, we might even use less sensitive terms like “croaked”, “kicked the bucket”, or “pushin’ up daisies”. But any way we say it, we usually mean the same thing: they’re dead and gone: their life is over.

Not so. Jesus said, “Who lives and believes in me never dies.” And in today’s reading from the Revelation of St. John we hear how that beloved apostle was granted

to see a vast number of people in white robes gathered around the throne of God and of the Lamb. His angelic guide asks him, "Who are these [people]?" and John answers, "Sir, you know". It seems to be his way of saying, "I was hoping you'd tell me." The angel then tells him, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation." He's talking about the faithful who have died on earth, many having been martyred; but all of them have carried their crosses for the Lord in one way or another through the trials and troubles of this world. Now they stand in glory and perfection, their sins washed away by the blood of Christ. They are even now singing their hymns of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord who brought them through it all, and who now cares for and shelters them where there is no more sadness or want of any kind. But what I want to highlight is that they are there now. While their bodies remain on earth waiting for the Day of Resurrection, their spirits are there already enjoying a foretaste of heavenly splendor. The point is that we very often misspeak when we say certain people are dead. If they lived in the faith in their time on earth, they are in fact still very much alive.

So, we don't see things as they are. A lot of those we would say are living are dead, and a lot of those we would say are dead are living. Hopefully that's clear by now. But as long as we're clearing up mistaken perceptions, I thought I'd mention a few other ways we tend not to see things as they are. The first has to do with the graves of those who have died. We tend to have – what shall I say? – a sense of permanence about the grave. We even call them the "final resting places" of the bodies buried within. Once again, nothing could be further from the truth. Returning to today's Gospel reading, after telling us that the dead come to life through hearing his Word (speaking of those who come to faith in him), Jesus goes on to say, "But don't marvel at this, for an hour is coming when *all* who are in their tombs will hear [my] voice and come out."

There's nothing permanent about a grave. It's just a temporary holding place for a body that will certainly be raised to life again. As a matter of fact, our word "cemetery" is derived from the Greek word for "dormitory", that is, a place to sleep. And sometimes it causes us to pause and wonder how in the world that might be accomplished. How could all those bodies buried and decayed, or burnt to ashes, or consumed by animals, or whatever, how could they possibly come forth alive again? But we needn't worry about the details. Surely it will be a small thing for the Lord who managed to call all things into existence from nothing to merely reassemble human bodies from elements that already exist.

And raise them up he will with a single command of his voice on the Last Day, which we often mistakenly refer to as the Day of Judgment. I've talked to a lot of Christians over the years who aren't looking forward to that day. They have in their minds a scene in which they are standing in the docket before the judgment seat of God. And there played out before the court in all too lurid detail are all the sins and misdeeds, the promises broken, the hurtful, hateful, idle words, even the wicked imaginings and selfish thoughts the person had in life. They see themselves being humiliated before a huge audience – but most of all their loved ones, and those who had respected and admired them in life. Here at last they all learn the truth in all its ugliness. And for people who think this way the prospect of such a scene taking place terrifies them.

Well, there is Day of Judgment coming; but it will not be for those who believe and trust in Christ. For them that day has already happened. It took place on Good Friday when the judgment of God fell on Jesus as he offered himself on the cross. There he took upon himself the judgment we deserve on account of our sins. Now, for

those who trust in him, there are no outstanding charges. They cannot be called into the courtroom. This is what Jesus says in today's Gospel. Not only have believers passed from death to life, but they have passed also out of judgment. Paul says the same thing in Romans when he asks, "Who will lay any charge against God's elect? It is the Lord who declares [them] innocent." So, for believers, there is no Day of Judgment coming. On the Last Day they will already be standing with the saints, clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Which leads me to the last misperception that I'd like to clear up. On this day we celebrate "All Saints". And usually when we think about the saints, we think primarily of those who have gone before us—and particularly those who led especially noteworthy, holy lives, doing wonderful things in the service of the Lord, or who suffered grievously while contending for the faith. They are rightly called saints, to be sure; but not because of anything they did or endured. They are saints only because, by God's gift of faith worked in them through hearing the Word of Jesus, they trusted in what he did for them. That's what entitled them to be called holy and enabled them to stand before the throne in everlasting perfection. And that too is what enabled them to endure their fiery trials and do holy work in the Lord's service while here below.

The last thought I'd leave you with is this then: what made them saints, their faith in Christ, is the same thing you have. And so, you too are rightly called a saint. This day that we celebrate is your day too. And celebrate it we do in the best way we can. While they gather around the throne of the Lamb wearing their white robes and singing God's praise, we who walk as yet by faith and not by sight join them by gathering around the altar of the Lamb and receiving to ourselves his body, his blood, and his Word of forgiveness that strengthen our faith and that clothe us in the same white robes of righteousness that they wear. We do it as a foretaste of the feast to come when we will all, with them, see things as they really are. May God in his mercy hasten that day, and grant to us all he has promised for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!