

Sermon: St Oswald's, Halton, Holy Communion Sunday 4 November 2018, All Saints' Sunday

Text: Revelation 21. 1-6; John 11. 32-44

Theme: Sursum Corda

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord -

the well-known and time-honoured responsory from the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Prayer of Consecration, known by its Latin original:

Sursum Corda.

Habemus ad Dominum -

which means literally, 'Up with your hearts – We have them (or hold them) before the Lord'.

This dialogue, so well known, is an apt reminder that while Christian worship can be understood as a merely human phenomenon, an earth-bound activity, its real locus or setting is in fact in heaven. Indeed, the Eucharistic Prayer keeps on stressing that point, in the words of the Prayer Book:

Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name....

Or, in this morning's liturgy:

That *with* angels and archangels and all the powers of heaven we may find a voice to sing your praise.

And indeed, the Prayer concludes:

By whom and whom and in whom, with all who stand before you in earth and heaven, we worship you, Father Almighty, in songs of everlasting praise.

It reminds us powerfully, that in a very real sense, whatever the size of a particular congregation, Christian worship is never lonely; rather, any act of worship is taken up or transported into the heavenlies, as the Holy Spirit unites earth and heaven as part of an eternal and all-embracing act of praise.

Sursum Corda: Lift up your hearts.

This morning's Gospel, the great narrative of the raising of Lazarus, is fundamental to the theology of St John's Gospel. It reminds us of a *present* reality. When Jesus met the deeply bereaved sisters Mary and Martha, devastated by the death of their beloved brother, the hope of a future resurrection at the last day didn't comfort them. But Jesus didn't respond about the future, he responded in the present – '*I am the resurrection and the life – whoever lives and believes in me will never die*'. And to prove it, he cried out, 'Lazarus, come forth'.

Now Lazarus, would one day die again, but the point is that in Christ, the saints, 'the great multitude that no one can number, of every race and tribe and people and nation', continues to live in Christ, the resurrection and the life.

This truth is expressed beautifully in the collect:

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical Body of your Son Jesus Christ.

I love that image of 'knitting together' – united indivisibly. *Sursum corda* – Lift up your hearts, because what we call the communion of saints is a *present* reality.

When I think of people I have lost, my parents, my grandparents, close friends - yes, they are lost from sight, and yet, as the beautiful Bidding Prayer at Nine Lessons and Carols says, 'they worship with us but upon another shore and in a greater light.

And the reading from Revelation, written at a time when the Church was suffering through persecution at the beginning of the second century, lays before us the truth that at the last, heaven and earth will become entirely one. As Bishop Tom Wright used to delight to say, the New Testament does not think of heaven as a kind of ethereal cloud, way up there; rather it speaks of a new creation, of a transformed and united heaven and earth, where God and humanity are one, and where the whole company of the redeemed is made new:

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people. God himself will be with them to wipe away every tear from their eyes - for God is making all things new.

And worship anticipates that great hope. Therefore, *Sursum Corda* – Lift up your hearts.

I want to finish by referring you to the end of the Gospel reading. Lazarus was bound with grave clothes, strips of cloth tied tightly around his body as if death had him entirely constrained. Here the words of Jesus – ‘Unbind him, and let him go free’. I once had a close friend; he was dying. In hospital he was bound by tubes, by breathing apparatus, by wonderful scientific technology, to try to preserve his life. But at the end the machines had to be switched off. ‘Unbind him, and let him go free.’ He was a Christian – ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ says the Lord.

He worships with us today upon that ‘other shore’ as do those we love but see no longer. *Sursum Corda*: Lift up your hearts – we lift them to the Lord.