

**November 3, 2024 – All Souls/All Saints – Revd Wim Kuiper  
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen**

Reading: John 11.32-44

As most of you will know, I started my ministry in this chaplaincy on the first Sunday of this calendar year. It has been a wonderful experience and I am hugely grateful for all that it has offered me. But as always with any job change, you win some and you lose some. One of the biggest changes, and in fact losses for me, is the fact that I have not been able to do any pastoral services since I am here. Services such as weddings and in particular baptisms and funerals are quite frequent in an average English parish. I am happy to say that I did many more baptisms than funerals in the place I was. Practically every Sunday, we had an extra baptism service, sometimes even more than one. The families that came in on such occasions were usually so large that it was impossible to combine them with our congregation in the regular Sunday morning service. During the week, it was also quite normal to have at least one funeral in church or in the crematorium, or to do a burial of ashes (which by the way is in my opinion and in the opinion of the church is a very good way of dealing with those remains). Baptisms are of course a great joy to do. But there can also be a lot of goodness in and around funerals. For me it always feels like treading on holy ground when I hear the stories of someone's life. To hear about the way in which their Christian faith carried them, sometimes in particular in their final months and days here on earth. I think that the church really has something special and very good to offer to all families and friends who mourn their loved ones. Funeral and memorial services offer an opportunity to express our gratitude for how we have been blessed by them, and also to let go of the things that were not so good, of our own regrets. Leaving it all into God's merciful hands. The many set prayers and traditional words of the liturgy, as well as the rituals of the church, can give us some kind of hold in times of great distress. May offer us some comfort in our sadness. Almost always, the families I met asked for Psalm 23 to be read and for the hymn 'Abide with me' to sing. And it is, therefore, also good to sing these very familiar words as we have come to church on this Sunday to commemorate the faithful departed. In particular those we ourselves have lost this past year, or longer ago.

Today's Gospel story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, is also normally mentioned in Anglican funeral services. The prayer that we use at the beginning of the service, right after the words of welcome, starts with as follows: 'God of all consolation, your Son Jesus Christ was moved to tears at the grave of Lazarus his friend.' It is important to remind ourselves of this part of the story that perhaps normally gets a bit less attention than what comes after.

That is, the dialogue between Jesus and the two sisters, Mary and the always very pragmatic Martha, followed by that great miracle that Jesus performed when he raised Lazarus up. But John stresses not for nothing that Jesus when he saw Mary and all the others weeping, was deeply moved in spirit and troubled (verse 33). He tells us that Jesus wept (verse 35), and a bit further again that he was deeply moved (verse 38). But then of course the story takes a wonderful turn towards a happy ending. Showing that for God nothing is impossible and giving the people a foreshadowing of what was about to come soon after. In the end, of course also Lazarus passed away another time. It was only by Christ's own glorious resurrection, that death has lost its final sting. That the gate towards eternal life was definitively opened for all of us.

And this is what is distinctive about the Christian faith. Because of the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, we can look death in the face with hope. The life of our beloved and our own life does not end with us leaving this world of ours. There is a different reality than what we can see while we are still here. What this reality exactly looks like, we don't know. The Bible very scarcely gives us some hints

about the hereafter, leaving it to a large extent to our imagination. And there has been a lot of that in the over 20 centuries of Christian history. We should be careful, though, with those unbiblical speculations and rather concentrate on the reality we are living in right now and on what we are to do as long as we are here. Bringing about God's will on earth, as it is in heaven. Not speculating too much, also means not fudging too much. Not fearing, but simply trusting. Eternal life is not something that starts after we have died. It is the kind of life that we are invited to live already at this very moment. A life filled with the hope that no matter what, God's perpetual light will continue to shine upon us. Christ has gone the way before us that we are now already following. Jesus wept with those who wept. He died just like all of us. He will stand by us when we go through that difficult passage that no one can evade. And with him we have the promise to rise again, coming through on the other side. Where we will finally see him eye to eye. His resurrection has indeed meant also for us the definitive victory over death.

The funeral liturgy therefore ends with the following prayer: May God in his infinite love and mercy bring the whole Church, living and departed in the Lord Jesus, to a joyful resurrection and the fulfilment of his eternal kingdom. Amen.