

Readings: Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44; Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24:1 -6

Past

My earliest memories are of 30 Woodville Terrace, a home I shared with my granny, my parents, my sister, and my uncle David. I remember playing in the garden and using the air-raid shelter as a hideout; going with my father to his allotment where I was forbidden to touch anything and sent off to play on my bike; pressing my face against Mr Hill's shop window and Mr Hill coming out to chase us away with: "If you want to buy a vatch buy a vatch, but if don't want to buy a vatch get your snotty beak off my vindow!" – he wasn't German by the way; and spending my first day at Leithamacademy, as I called it then. I wonder what your earliest memories are? They'll certainly be different from mine.

But one thing we all have in common is that we all had a beginning, nine months (more or less) before we were born, after the point when we were 'made'. God the creator watched over our development and has been watching over us ever since.

In Psalm 24 we read: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him. For he laid the earth's foundation on the seas and built it on the ocean depths." – powerful words that remind us that God has created a wonderful world and it all belongs to him, including all the people in his world, and that includes us. Down through the ages people have rejoiced in the fact that they belong to God who blesses them and have bowed down in worship. The Psalm we've just read from is a song which God's people sang as they went to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship him. We sometimes sing part of that Psalm today when we celebrate Communion: "Ye gates, lift up your heads on high..."

God's saints aren't dusty figures from past or people who are so holy they are unreachable but people like you and me whom God loves, whom God wants, and whom God chooses – this isn't to decry those whose lives inspire us, both those from the Bible and since then. God's saints have been worshipping him for centuries and we saints of today can join with them. This is, after all, All Saints' Day

Present

What an amazing present! We appreciate more and more just how wonderful the wonderful world that God has made is. We can talk face to face with friends and relatives on the other side of the world. We can access a mind boggling fund of knowledge on the world wide web. We can travel to far-flung places in hours rather than days and weeks. And thanks to an amazing network of roads we can get around our own country and Europe with relative ease.

Our present is also scary – recession, worsening industrial relations, tension in the Middle East, climate change, conflict and terrorism, crime and violence.

Jesus, who was around at the beginning of time, came as God into this world. He limited himself to the first century. His present was radically different from ours. In the world he lived in, in his present, transport was often painfully slow, medicine was limited, there was a strong sense of strong family identity and the Roman authorities ruled everywhere, making sure everyone knew who was in charge.

This was the background to his world when Jesus heard the news about the sickness of his friend Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary – a home he frequented, a family he loved – today’s Gospel reading tells part of the story.

So let me fill out the story a bit. When he heard about Lazarus’ illness, did Jesus say: “We’d better drop everything and head off to Bethany as quickly as possible.”? No, he said: “This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God’s glory by glorifying God’s Son.” By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. As well as anger, anger at death, welling up in him, so did sorrow – and Jesus wept, showing that he had ordinary relationships with people. But most importantly, Jesus showed by his words and actions that he had come as God into that present.

He brought new physical life to Lazarus. But Jesus had also brought newness to the quality of life for those alive who knew and loved him then. He healed the sick, he forgave those who recognised they were sinners, he brought hope to those without hope. He changed people’s lives forever.

But Lazarus and his sisters were eventually to die and they became part of the past. Jesus also died but he came alive again. He is part of the past, the present and the future – the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. He is alive for us now in the present but he will also be there in the future.

Future

Much of what we can say about the future will be speculative since we do not really know much for certain. A certain John – almost certainly not the same John that wrote the Gospel – was a prisoner on the island of Patmos, when he had a vision of what heaven would be like, a mixture of a fabulous city and a splendid wedding. So while we cannot imagine what heaven will be like, we do know that God will have moved into the neighbourhood, making his home with men and women. Everyone who has ever loved God, the saints, and that includes us, will be there – past, present and future. Wow!!!

But right now, we have to live in the present, experiencing the new life that Jesus brings, demonstrating that new life in our daily lives, knowing that the best is yet to come.

Prayer of confession

Lord, in the past we have not always lived to please you,
in the past we have not always reflected the new life
you have has given to your people.

Lord, in the present, in our daily lives and in the life of our Church family,
we want to see more of your new life.

Lord, you forgive those who ask you to,
and you come to live with us in a new way.

Come and make your home with us, everlasting God,
the beginning and the end.

Amen.