



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2024
WISDOM OF SOLOMON 3:1-9; PSALM 24; REVELATION 21:1-6; JOHN 11:32-44

THE BELL-TOLLING TRUTH OF ALL SAINTS



As some of you know, this past August I was invited to preach at St. Paul's Cathedral in London when our Compline Choir was in residence. It was an honor, but also a bit surreal—to be in that hallowed space with a diverse

worshipping community of several hundred from across the world, gathered into the rotunda, while hundreds more tourists roamed behind ropes at the west end of the nave during the service.

St. Paul's Cathedral is a peculiar place in so many ways, but as I stepped into the pulpit, and as I joined the choir in Evensong each day, I felt a keen sense of the spirit of others who have led worship there in the nearly four centuries since Christopher Wren designed the majestic building, and also those who predate the current building, who stood on the same sacred ground across some 1700 years, proclaiming good news to the masses, whether they were listening or not.

One such person was John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's in the 1620s. Long a favorite poet of mine, known for his gift of weaving words together in metaphysical beauty. You will surely recognize his most famous turns of phrase—*no man is an island...*and *for whom the bell tolls*.

He penned those words exactly 400 years ago as part of a collection of meditations and prayers. The church had been closed in 1623 for a time due to plague; many people died; everyone was impacted. We know that Donne himself fell ill and nearly died. When he returned to the pulpit months later,

scholars say his preaching changed. He more fiercely spoke truth into the political and theological arenas of that era which were fraught with change.

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is part of the continent...

Antiquated masculine language notwithstanding, the truth is there: we are all connected. This Feast of All Saints hangs on this very thread. Today we remember those who have gone before, the community that gathers here and now, and on this feast day we baptize infants and children into resurrection hope... a faithful hope that this life gleams its deepest meaning by the light of God's eternal love for us and by virtue of the cloud of witnesses that encourage us on the journey.

The baptismal imagery we use today is replete with images of life and death, holding the tension of this reality that, as Donne wrote poetically, "any man's death diminishes me; therefore, never send for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." We are in this together.

We hold those whom we love but see no longer in our hearts and prayers

with special intention, even while we hold these infants and children in the arms of the church's embrace that welcomes them with great joy. And in the mysteries of God, we claim that all of us are gathered into the embrace of our loving God—in this life and in the life to come.

This afternoon at 4:30, in the Evensong service for this Feast of All Saints, the choir that gathers singers from several generations—children, youth, and adults— will sing an anthem that is simply sublime. If John Donne is one of my favorite poets, then *The Souls of the Righteous*, composed by Geraint Lewis, is surely one of my favorite pieces of music. He composed it at St. Paul's Cathedral in London just three decades ago, originally intended for All Saints' Day 1992, but premiered for a memorial service honoring church musician William Mathias a few months earlier.

Drawing on Donne's treatise of bell-tolling connection, we could hear it as if it were offered in memoriam for any person, ourselves included. Our loved ones are gathered up in its grace, too.

The words are from the Wisdom of Solomon reading we heard a few moments ago: "the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God... to the eyes of the foolish, they seem to have perished... but they are at peace."

Rarely can so few words offer such replete affirmation of our religious hope, that there is more to this life than what besets us here, and in God's grand design, there is peace to be had, true and eternal peace. The shalom of God promised to us all. This is our hope; this is our destination. And nothing in this world, nothing—not powers nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nothing, not even death, can separate us from that wonderful truth of God's love which is the source of such a peace that surpasses all human understanding. This is good news, friends. I count it as a gift that we are reminded of this sacred promise today, and let it color the way we see our world in the coming days.

One who sings prays twice, as the saying goes, so I would encourage you to let the anthem this afternoon wash

over you. The music builds from soft lilt to soaring hope, resolving into a sublime peace. My words here do not do it justice. Come and listen and be moved.

Be moved because today is the Feast of All Saints, and none of us is an island,

we are all part of the continent, yeah, even the Communion of Saints, that mystical sweet Communion that gathers us into the eternal embrace of a loving God.

And for that, my friends, may God's holy name be praised. Amen.

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 *[The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect.]*



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL