



A Yet More Glorious Day

1 Corinthians 15

Fr. William Klock

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Saints' Day (Observed)

Have you ever tried to put together a second-hand puzzle and been frustrated by extra pieces that didn't belong? I remember going with my family to stay at a beach house owned by some friends. I finished both the books I'd taken with me so I opened up a puzzle that I found there and started putting it together. The first thing I noticed was that there seemed to be an awful lot of pieces. A thousand is a lot, but this definitely seemed like more than that. I also noticed that a lot of the pieces had colours and bits of images on them that didn't match up with the picture on the box. I started sorting pieces anyway and before too long I came up with *eight* corners. Aha! Some sadistic person had jumbled two different puzzles into one box. I decided to make it my mission to assemble *both* puzzles. I didn't realise how hard it would be to sort them out and never got very far.

I bring up those two jumbled puzzles because it's been suggested to me that All Saints' Day presents a perfect opportunity to sort out two *theological* puzzles that have been jumbled together in the minds of a lot of Christians: heaven, on the one hand, and resurrection, on the other. Heaven and resurrection are two very distinct doctrines, but through the centuries Christians have blurred the lines between them, we've mixed up the language and ideas behind them—we've dumped both puzzles in the same box. I'm thankful for having had some relatively clear teaching on both of these doctrines in the churches in which I was raised and in seminary,

but for years, as I've thought and written and preached on these subjects, I've always felt like someone was slipping some extraneous puzzle pieces onto the table when I wasn't looking—pieces that didn't quite fit. And I realise that it's not just me. We recite the Nicene Creed every Sunday. The Creed is very clear. But we often sing hymns and songs that muddle things without us even realising it. Popular Christian books and movies confuse us even more. Many of them don't just jumble the heaven and resurrection puzzles together—they often throw away the resurrection puzzle almost completely, saving just a few pieces that we then mistakenly try to work into the heaven puzzle.

Consider the Creed we just recited together. What do we believe? We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, for us and for our salvation came down from heaven. After accomplishing that work—most important of all, after having been crucified, buried, and then having risen from the dead, he ascended back into heaven. And yet the Creed also reminds us that Jesus won't stay in heaven forever. He will return with glory to judge the living and the dead and to establish his kingdom, which will have no end. And think of the last thing we confess in the Creed: We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Heaven and resurrection are two distinct ideas; two distinct things and two distinct doctrines. Heaven is where Jesus came from, it's where he is now, and it's the place from which he will one day return in order to establish his kingdom—not *there*, but *here*. That's what resurrection is about. That's what we wait for and as we wait our *hope* is in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come—the restoration of God's Creation, the setting to rights of this temple that he created.

These ideas became much more distinct in my thinking the last few years, beginning especially with the study I did while preaching through

Genesis. As I said back then, the best interpretation of Genesis 1 is to see it as a sort of liturgical text describing God's creation of the cosmos as his building a temple for himself. That makes us his priests. And then we rebelled. We tried to take control of the temple for ourselves. We started worshipping ourselves; we started worshipping the creation instead of the Creator. And in response to our sin, God barred us from the tree of life. God uses the idea of that temple throughout the rest of the Bible, bringing us back to it over and over to remind us of what we've broken, what we've lost, and also that he's in the process of fixing and restoring both it and us. Jesus is the centre and the pinnacle of that story. In Jesus the restoration of the temple was inaugurated. He is the great high priest and in him God restores us to his priesthood. And yet the last two chapters of Revelation give us an image of the temple fully restored. We see the New Jerusalem descending to earth from heaven—the two joined together. And that New Jerusalem is portrayed as an enormous cube with dimensions representing perfection. It's a heavenly holy of holies. The end of the story of redemption shows us the Creation—the temple God built for himself—restored, God once again dwelling with his people, and humanity once again restored to our lost priesthood in this great cosmic temple.

The problem is that we've lost the box with that puzzle in it. A few of the pieces have been mixed into the other puzzle—the one depicting heaven. But mostly we've either forgotten about the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come or we've spiritualised it. And in doing that we've lost sight of the very thing that's right there in the creed—the thing we confess every Sunday and that for which we *look*—that we hope *in* and that we hope *for*. There's no time for a long history lesson this morning, but we can blame this mostly on two things. Our first problem is that the Church absorbed too much

pagan Greek philosophy. We accepted the pagan idea that the physical world is bad, that our physical bodies are bad, and that the spiritual is good. The Greeks looked forward to death as a freeing of the spirit from the dead weight of the physical body and the physical world. This is the kind of talk we so often hear at funerals. But brothers and sisters, that's pagan thinking, not Christian thinking. Just think again of the first chapter of Genesis. As God created the physical world he declared it to be *good*. When he created humanity from the dust, he went a step further: he declared our creation *very good*. We don't need to shed our physical bodies. What we need is for God to fix, to restore, to resurrect them. But when we started thinking like pagan Greeks, we all but forgot about that resurrection.

The other thing that took resurrection off our radar was the development of the doctrine of Purgatory—the idea that Christians still need to be purged of all our unholiness before we can enter heaven. So much emphasis was put on being made fit for heaven that we forgot that our ultimate hope isn't for heaven, but for what comes after: for resurrection.

The good theology is still there in the Creed. It always has been. We say we believe it every Sunday. It's still there in the best theology books, the best Christian literature, and the best Christian hymns, but there's so much out there that's just plain wrong that we get confused. Some of our most popular hymns and songs show the confusion. Think of "Away in a Manger" where we sing, "And fit us for heaven to live with thee there". Or "Abide with Me": "Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee." Friends, there's nothing "vain" about this earth that God created and called "good". Or "How Great Thou Art": "When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation to take me home, what joy shall fill

my heart." Again, heaven isn't "home". We're home now, it's just that our home needs God's renovation. And the idea of escape—being "taken away", that's Greek philosophy talking, not the Bible. Jesus has given us a mission of presence. He calls us to live through tribulation and trials as witnesses of his grace. Another song that always comes to my mind is one I sang a lot in University as part of a choral ensemble I was in: "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory." Heaven is certainly a place of rejoicing, but the day of victory that we should all be looking forward to is that the day of *resurrection*. These are all otherwise wonderful hymns, but when it comes to our ultimate hope, they confusion pagan ideas with biblical ones.

If we think none of this matters, St. Paul stresses how important it is that we get this right. In 1 Corinthians 15 he gives us a wonderful look at our future in Jesus. What he describes there is our *hope* as Christians. It's a long passage and I can't read the whole thing this morning, but in verses 20-26 Paul writes:

In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits [the first of the harvest] of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:20-26)

Paul then goes on to describe what that resurrection looks like. Again, we don't have time for the whole passage,

but his point is that if Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection of the dead, our hope is in one day being raised from death just as he was. Paul's Greek isn't the easiest thing to translate and as a result many of our English translations confuse the issue by talking about physical bodies dying and spiritual bodies being raised, but the essential point that Paul makes is that in the resurrection God will clothe our perishable bodies with the imperishable. We don't stop being dust, but we do become something more.

The first man [Adam] was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man [Jesus] is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:47-49)

Consider that in the Incarnation, the Word of God took our flesh upon himself. He became fully human. The Creator didn't stop being the Creator, but he also became the very dust of his creation. And when he experienced resurrection he didn't stop being dust. He didn't leave his physical body behind. If he had there would have been no empty tomb that first Easter morning. Jesus' perishable body was raised to imperishability. And brothers and sisters, that's what we have to look forward to. St. Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 15:50-56.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body

must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

**“O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?”**

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice: it’s not by taking us to heaven that God defeats death; *he defeats death in our resurrection.*

Imperishability, immortality is God’s gift to his people. It was a gift that Genesis describes in terms of Adam’s access to the tree of life. Revelation 22 describes our renewed access to the tree of life in God’s restored creation. Without that gift we’re nothing more than dust. Paul writes to Timothy that only God himself is immortal (1 Timothy 6:16), but that “our Savior Christ Jesus...abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

Now, not all of our hymns are confusing. We opened our service this morning singing Bp. William Walsham How’s “For All the Saints” and it’s hard to find a hymn that expresses our faith and our hope any better. It gets it exactly right. It’s number 126 in the hymnal and I invite you to follow along with me.

*For all the saints, who from their labours rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy Name, O Jesus, be forever blessed.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

*Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress and their Might;
Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well fought fight;*

*Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

Here’s the Gospel, here’s Good News. As we remember the saints who have gone before we remember their faith. They rest from their labours with Jesus because they did not hesitate to confess his lordship before the world. They trusted in him. In the midst of trials and tribulations, he was their “Rock, their Fortress and their Might”. Jesus was “their Captain in the well fought fight”. In the darkness of the world, he was “their one true Light”.

*O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
And win with them the victor’s crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

Don’t let these simply be words you sing. This ought to be our prayer as we remember our brothers and sisters who have gone before us: May we be as faithful, true, and bold as they were. May we fight as nobly as they fought of old. May Jesus be *our* Rock, *our* Fortress, *our* Might, *our* Captain as he was theirs. And as we think of them, let us be encouraged. We may feel weak and powerless, but just as Jesus took care of them, he will take care of us.

*O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

And here the hymn starts piecing together one of our two puzzles. The hymn stresses the unity of the Church. We may be fighting the fight here on earth as our brothers and sisters rest from their labours, but there is no division in the body of Christ. Even as we feebly struggle and as they in glory shine, we all are one, because we’re all in Christ Jesus. As the writer

of Hebrews reminds us, whether we see them or not, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. This is what the fifth verse is getting at:

*And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave, again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

Brothers and sisters, that great cloud of witnesses cheers us on from heaven as they sing the distant triumph song. This is the picture we see in our Epistle this morning from Revelation. Those from every nation, having been through tribulation themselves, now gather around the lamb to praise him day and night. We’re reminded that Jesus has done the same for us as he has done for them. We fight as they fought and we will rest in Jesus as they now do:

*The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blessed.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

This is the point at which so many other hymns—not all, but many of them—stop, as if the “sweet calm of paradise” is our ultimate hope. “Paradise” seems to have been Jesus’ preferred word for describing heaven. To the thief who died beside him on the cross he said, “Today you will be with me in paradise”. St. Paul also talked about being caught up to paradise in a vision of heaven. Paul also describes it in 1 Corinthians 15 as sleeping in the Lord. Some people have made too much of the idea of “sleep” as being literal. Paul also says that to die is gain (Philippians 1:21), and it’s hard to imagine sleep as either gain or enjoying Jesus in paradise.

What’s interesting and somewhat ironic is that as Christians have

collapsed resurrection into heaven, we've put our focus on something that the Bible doesn't tell us much about. Whole books, even movies, have been written about "heaven", but they're rooted in speculation or questionable personal experiences that have been elevated above Scripture. Most of them only have anything to say about heaven at all because all the puzzle pieces have been jumbled into one box. What they describe is really the resurrection and the new heaven and earth, but they end up being spiritualised and gutted of real significance. If we go to the Bible, what we find is that it doesn't focus much on heaven because heaven is temporary. It's enough to know that to be there is to rest in Jesus. It's enough to be able to think of it as paradise.

John Polkinghorne, the Cambridge physicist who's also a priest, uses an illustration that I've found very helpful. "God", he says, "will download our software onto his hardware until the time he gives us new hardware to run the software again for ourselves."¹ That resonates with me as a former computer technician. People brought their broken computers to me. To preserve their data during the repair, we would back everything up to our server. When the computer was repaired and running right again, we'd copy the data back. As people we're not all that different. We're infected by sin. We're broken. We're not running right. Death puts an end to sin in our bodies. As Paul writes, again, in 1 Corinthians 15, the seed has to be buried and "die" in order to sprout a tree. We live with the promise that God will renew our bodies and restore our access to the tree of life, but we have to wait until he's ready. In the meantime, we rest with Jesus in paradise—God looks after our software on his backup server. Scripture doesn't say exactly how that

works or exactly what life will be like in that state, but we can take comfort in the fact that, as Paul says, it is "gain" over where we stand now and that Jesus talks about being with him in paradise. And yet that's not the end of things. Look at verses 6 and 7 of the hymn.

*But lo! there breaks a yet more
glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright
array;
The King of glory passes on His way.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

*From earth's wide bounds, from
ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the
countless host,
Singing to Father, Son and Holy
Ghost:
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

As wonderful as heaven is, "there breaks a yet more glorious day". That's the bit that gets lost when we throw all the puzzle pieces in the same box. This is the bit that doesn't make sense when we think like pagan Greeks that the physical is bad and the spiritual is good. This is that "moment" that Paul describes as the "last trump" when Jesus returns to deal the final blow to death as he resurrects the saints and puts an end to the perishable, clothing us with immortality. This is the day the Creed talks about when we confess that we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Pop-theology has it wrong; the hymn has it right. The "pearly gates" aren't the doorway to heaven as such; they're the gates to the New Jerusalem. They're the gates into the holy of holies in God's restored Creation and we're invited through them because, in the resurrection, Jesus restores us to the priesthood for which we were originally created. And so we enter those gates as priests, singing "Hoy, holy, holy" to our Triune God and to our Incarnate Lord.

Now, why is it important that we unjumble the puzzles and get this right? Look at the end of 1 Corinthians 15:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

If our hope were nothing more than going to heaven when we die Paul might have written, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, rest secure that a serene and peaceful eternity waits for you." But that's not what he says. He tells us that because our hope is the coming resurrection of which Jesus is the firstfruits, we have reason to be steadfast in the work our Lord has given us—steadfast in mission. One of the results of getting this wrong, one of the results of throwing all the pieces of the puzzle in one box and collapsing the resurrection into heaven and one of the results of thinking of physical bodies and the physical word as bad and spiritual things as good is that we lose sight of the big picture. Why oil the machine, so to speak, when it's only destined for destruction? The resurrection isn't just a doctrine we check off a list of essentials. *The resurrection shapes who we are, what we do, how we live, and ultimately what our mission looks like.*

Brothers and sisters, if we understand what God is about and if we can step back to see the big picture, what we see is that God is doing something much bigger than we've often realised. When we don't see a hope beyond heaven, our tendency is to retreat from the world. Our tendency is to think only of the "spiritual". We tend to approach the wider creation as if it doesn't really matter. Evangelism tends to be seen as grabbing as many "souls" as we can and then escaping to heaven. But when we see the big picture, we realise that God's redemptive purposes are much bigger than we realised. The redemption of humanity is only one part of God's

¹ Quoted by Tom Wright in *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 176.

redemption of all creation. He's in the process of redeeming us and restoring us to our role as priests, but priests need a temple in which to serve. That's what Eden is all about in Genesis. That's what the New Jerusalem is all about in Revelation. The Church's mission, then, is not about catching souls and then escaping to heaven with them. The Church's mission is about being the advanced guard as the kingdom of God—the kingdom of heaven—breaks into the world. It's to live out our ministry as priests by preparing the world and pointing humanity toward the day when God's kingdom comes in all its fullness. It's calling the people around us to join us in our work of preparing for the coming of our King. And in that context everything we do becomes ministry. Remember that Adam was called to be a priest in caring for the garden. Whether preaching or teaching or evangelising, building or gardening or cashiering, fixing cars or flying airplanes or plowing snow, baking or cleaning or taking care of kids, lawyering or doctoring or politicking, nothing is mundane when it comes to the work of God's priests serving in his temple. The question is: How do we bake or teach or garden or politic in a way that manifests the kingdom and prepares humanity and Creation for restoration and resurrection? A grasp of God's big picture will also make us more like Jesus in our mission. Think of our study of Luke. Jesus didn't travel around just shouting that the kingdom of God was at hand. Even though the full coming of the kingdom was far off, it was breaking into the world and Jesus manifested and lived out that breaking in. He *showed* people the kingdom. He gave people a glimpse into the temple, into restored Creation. He cast out demons, he freed the captives, he gave sight to the blind, he condemned corruption, false shepherds, and called for reform and showed the world what justice looks like. In contrast, we too often think of evangelism as little more than giving

someone a Bible or a tract or sending money to organisations that do. Sometimes we may even tell them ourselves. But we don't often go much beyond that. Brothers and sisters, we need to manifest the kingdom like Jesus did, knowing that what we do today gives people a glimpse of our future hope—a glimpse of God's plan for us and for Creation. We need to have as much passion for sharing the Gospel in deeds as we do in words. We need to care for the poor and the sick, we need to befriend the lonely, encourage the depressed, and we need to work for justice in our relationships and in the wider world. We need to show people that salvation isn't just pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, but that salvation is new life for all of us in a world made new and serving our Creator, who not only offers us the fruit of the tree of life, but who gave his own Son to restore us to himself.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in the collect we gave you thanks for having knitted us together with all those who have gone before in one communion in the mystical body of your Son. We asked for grace to follow in their footsteps of godly living that we might one day inherit the unspeakable joys of your kingdom. We ask these things again, Father, and ask also for the grace and courage to manifest the unspeakable joys of your kingdom in the world today. Teach us how to reveal your kingdom the way Jesus did, in the ordinary things of everyday life and in seeking to serve all those in need of your gift of redemption and life. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.