

Christ Church, Georgetown
All Saints' Day, November 6, 2016
The Rev. Timothy Cole
Romans 12:5: "We, though many, are one. "

On August 28, 1963, a short walk from this place, Dr. Martin Luther King made his famous speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Over 250,000 people were gathered there to hear him. I suspect that there will be one or two people in our congregation that were there to experience that great sense of so many people gathered to one purpose.

But those of us who were not there will doubtless have had similar experiences of being part of a great gathering. You may have attended one of those vast rock concerts or great sporting events or been present at some political rally. I have never attended a great political rally but the rock concert and the big sporting event is familiar enough. I remember as a boy spending an entire rugby international with my feet of the ground supported on the shoulders of two Welsh miners. These were in the days where only parts of the grounds were seated. There is something very powerful about being physically part of a vast crowd gathered with a single purpose. I also have been present at some large field services in the Army. We had one before deploying into Bosnia with an entire brigade of over 3000 soldiers present. Typically, the PA system was designed for a church hall so I am not sure how many of the soldiers heard a lot of what the General or I said to them! The singing of Hymns was pretty impressive though. At least in terms of volume! I think Dr. Neary, Tom our organist, or anyone who loved music would have found it a rather difficult experience! Despite these things, however, we gathered together and we said our prayers before moving into the operational area and I hope we went a little better prepared as people as a result.

"We, though many are one."

Three things are in my mind this week as I think about the triumph of the saints in light. I am sure they are in yours also.

First - well the day of decision is upon us! The greatest show on earth is building to its climax on Tuesday - though I sense that, while some wait with bated breath, many of you wait with more of a sigh of resignation than a pant of excitement! But this time next week we will have a new President elect.

And, in preparation I turned to those famous words of the great man that sat in stony silence behind Martin Luther King when he spoke of his dream for the future and a better society.

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Small wonder that King chose that spot to speak.

These are all too familiar words to all of you, I know, but they are still very fresh and new to me. Such a short, short address and yet such a powerful and moving statement.

It was spoken, of course, by Abraham Lincoln at the dedication of a war cemetery in Gettysburg on Thursday, November 19, 1863, four and a half months after the battle that took place there.

It is clear that the faces of the countless fallen are all around him as Lincoln speaks and we get the very raw sense of the obligation that he feels, which the dead, place upon us, the living.

“The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, (How wrong he was about that) but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

It seems to me that these are the best of words for us to have in our hearts as we prepare for the results of this, somewhat bitter and in some respects ignoble election, next week. It is said that the measure of our true belief in democracy is not discovered in us when we win but rather when we lose. For democracy is the bowing of the will to the majority, even if you think they are wrong, and the cemeteries both here and in Europe are full of those who died that we might have the opportunity to win and to lose.

“We, though many, are one.”

Who ever wins, we will pray for them here, not because of their politics, but because they are the people’s choice.

And we will pray also for the same spirit of unity after conflict, peace after division, that Lincoln sought to call into being after that terrible civil war. A spirit that, I believe we have here at Christ Church. A spirit that is willing to put the very most important before the extremely important, to put the desire to stand together before God before our divided human opinion and to put this nation under God before our differences and our disagreements. If this country could do that after the blood letting of the Civil War then, however divided it may be today, it simply must be possible for it to do it again after next Tuesday. The task may be big, but it is as nothing compared to the one that faced Lincoln.

“We, though many are one”

So much falls in November around this theme of remembrance. Serving in the British Army as a chaplain, as I did for many years, November 11th, Armistice Day, has formed a significant pivot in the year. Here, in the US, we celebrate Veterans Day of course where we give thanks for all those who have served in the Armed Forces and not just those who have died for their country. In Great Britain, on the 11th though, most if not all the country, certainly all the Army Bases and public offices and buildings, stop what they are doing and everyone stands in silence for those 2 minutes on the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month when the guns at last fell silent on the Western Front in 1918.

Some of you may have seen pictures of the Tower of London with the mote filled with ceramic poppies to commemorate the outbreak of the Great War. 888,246 of them set out like a great river of blood pouring into the mote and overflowing it. We are also conscious that over 115,000 American soldiers gave their lives in that war that conflict. Lincoln’s words echo down the ages across all the struggles and sacrifices of human kind. “We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

“We though many, are one.”

And here today, on this All Saints Sunday we consider a different kind of election, a different kind of remembrance and a different kind of hero. Today we think of those who, as the liturgy reminds us, are, with angels and arch-angels, the whole company of heaven who gather with us around the altar each week.

Here we find not the overshadowed sadness, honor, pride and profound obligation we feel as we remember the fallen, but rather we hear the shout and song of triumph. A presence that bears in upon us, at the edges of our vision, the eternal light. Here is less obligation and more hopeful encouragement to run the race of life and faith.

As the writer to Hebrew's says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” Hebrews 12.1

“We though many are one body”.

Today we celebrate the victory of Christian lives, lived well, lived for the good and lived out against all the obstacles of evil and the brokenness of the world. Those with a capital 'S' who have the official title of Saint and those with a small 's' who have, even so, led remarkable lives and that are a significant part of who we are as a church and a people.

One such is Samuel Seabury, who's consecration on Nov 14th 1784 in Aberdeen, we will remember at the institution next Sunday. (You see so much remembrance is focused in this month of November.) Seabury travelled to Scotland because it takes other Bishops to consecrate a new Bishop and the English Bishops were forbidden to deal with the church of the rebellious colony. He went to Aberdeen so that the Bishops of the new church of the new world would have the Apostolic succession. That is the direct physical touch passed through the generations from Christ and the Apostles to our present day Bishops. There is a real sense in which, when the Bishop lays hands on us in Confirmation, that that touch has been passed to us from Christ himself. All our Bishops trace their succession through Seabury to the ancient church and to the Apostles and Christ; one succession, one story, one church, one faith.

“We, though many, are one body in Christ.”

So today we give thanks for all the great lives of faith that gather around us just beyond the edges of our sight each week and whose joyful singing we hear along side that of our choir's and our own.

For me, the most present are the lives of the good and faithful I have known and loved and whose example I aspire to follow. Then there are the saints I did not know, but whose lives speak to me in a powerful way. At any great gathering, we know very few people, but the ones we do know, that stand or stood next to us, and who shared that experience, are always the most important to us. Beyond them are the countless others who share our purpose. To whom we are bound in fellowship without knowing them.

“We, though many are one body in Christ.”

And I am sure that, if you don't feel much connection with All Saints Day at the moment, if you were to think of the people you have known and known of in this way, you would have a real sense of what this day is actually all about. Read the lives of the Saints and some of them will become your friends. Remember the faithful lives of people you have been lucky enough to know and you will sense their presence too, among the great company of heaven, as we join our worship with theirs each week here at this altar.

They were elected, not by men but by God. Whatever the elections, selections and choices of human beings, we hold up in joyful song today the election, the choice by God of the Saints. Their faces rise up to greet us and to cheer us on to the goal they have already achieved. Their shouts remind us that we are also elected, chosen by God. Their songs remind us that, no matter what happens in our lives, the victory is already won. Their dream is realized. Ours is just begun.