All Saints Sunday, November 7, 2010

Immanuel Church on the Hill, Zabriskie Chapel


When I was a child growing up, the Gospel for All Saints’ Sunday—or at least for the feast day of All Saints’—was the Beatitudes from Matthew’s Gospel. Then came the Revised Common Lectionary. We now have options—is that good? I remember Prof. Stuart Henry who was my Ph.D. dissertation advisor at Duke. He was a staunch Presbyterian who served the First Presbyterian Church of Natchez before joining the Duke faculty. He always wore crisp white oxford cloth long-sleeve shirts. Once I got to know him, I said one day: Might you consider a nice crisp light blue oxford cloth long-sleeve shirt. He said: No, I wear white shirts because there are enough decisions in life without starting my day with one. So, there was something good about the Beatitudes always at All Saints. In the Beatitudes Matthew says: blessed are the poor in spirit. Luke’s writer says: blessed are the poor. Luke is always concerned with the outcast, the poor, the forgotten.

This morning we turn to another part of Luke’s Gospel—the charming tale of the woman who married in sequence seven brothers. “In the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” Husband one, husband two, and so forth, husband after husband. This gospel sounds like the script of an English comedy on the BBC.

I have always pitied the woman. Can you imagine getting married seven times? Give me a break! Can you imagine marrying seven brothers? I should think the poor woman would have had enough of the family by the time of her death and by the time of the resurrection! Perhaps she would say: I will take being single for eternity! She might well be happy to sing for the ages the country music song by Loretta Lynn: “Sleeping single in a double bed.”

We hope that the woman who married seven brothers and us all will be “children of the resurrection.” We gather because we worship the God “not of the dead but of the living.” We know—or wish to believe—that all of us are “alive in God.”

The feast, the octave, of All Saints always comes at a good time. In the long green season of Pentecost, I grow somewhat bored with the church year—to be honest. All Saints’ tide is a joyous moment in what seems like endless liturgical time. We put on white stoles and we talk of the saints—these stars in the firmament of the Church and in the inner life of us all.

The last two weeks I have thought about little other, nothing else, than the burning of our worship space, Seminary Chapel or Immanuel Chapel. It has been a consuming grief for many. So many decisions are required by us all—short term and long term. I have pondered over and over again the good news from Isaiah 61:4:

“They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations.”
How will the devastation be raised up? I guess that’s my work as a development person. But there is a spiritual dimension to building up the ancient ruins, to raising up the former devastations. Israel’s hope was always a hope for return, a return to the Land. So, we hope for a new and wonderful worship space for ICOH and the Seminary. We hope to return to a space we will love and come to know like the old space.

The Christian’s hope is the resurrection—our eternal life with God. Israel’s hope and our hope are for healing, pardon and grace. We all long for a homeplace and a place where God is with us, Immanuel. Israel returns to the Land. Christians return to the Lord, the one who is our Resurrection Hope—the way, the truth and the life.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, says that to speak of “the resurrection of our bodies is to look for the restoration of our memories.” This is an insight we should not miss. “Being aware of our memories in God’s presence, is, of course, part of the prayer of confession. The hard thing is to make it (restoration of our memories) part of our thanksgiving too, in the sense of being ready always to acknowledge before God what we are and, therefore, what we have been, and at the same time bless God that his grace makes opportunities out of all our sin and unhappiness.” God’s grace makes the chapel fire an opportunity, an opportunity which is ours this day.

Yes, our hope is a hope for the past—for our native land, for the temples devastated. But God also is in the future—and there is a new city which will come down from heaven. “Risen life is the ultimate hope”—and it is the hope that resides in the Communion of the Saints. Nothing separates us from God—and the saints are with God as we will be. Heaven and earth are married in the saints. There is in the Communion of the Saints an ongoing celebration of hope and life. We long for our native land, like the Israelites longed for a Jewish homeland. Our native land is in the person and work of Jesus—and our land is with the saints and so now we call their names in reverent hope.

We will rebuild Seminary Chapel or Immanuel Chapel—but it will be an interim place for us all. Our permanent home is with the saints in that homeland which is heaven where God reigns until the end of the ages.

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