

Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Feast of All Saints (tr.) – November 3, 2024

All the Saints

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44



St. Finian's Well, Kenmare, County Kerry, Ireland, September 2021

[John 11:32-44] When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Three years ago, I spent a four-month sabbatical exploring Celtic spirituality, including travel to Ireland and Scotland. My first week was in Kenmare, a small town in southern Ireland at the head of a bay cradling the north Atlantic Ocean. On my second day there, I took a long walk and came upon the Old Kenmare Cemetery, a quiet place bounded by an ancient stone wall that has served as a graveyard since the seventh century.

Many of the headstones were so weathered and crumbling, it was impossible to tell when or for whom they'd been erected. There was a dedicated plot for victims of the Great Famine, with more than 5000 people buried there. And at the center of the oldest part of the cemetery were the remains of a church established by St. Finian in the 600's as part of a monastic community.

At the far end of the graveyard, I found a break in the wall with some narrow steps that led down to the bay. There on the shore are the ruins of an old well dedicated to St. Finian and whose water has the reputation for healing sore or infected eyes. People had left prayers and candles on top of the well and drawn chalk crosses on the side. It

is one of the most peaceful places I have ever been.

I later learned that the well existed long before St. Finian. In pre-Christian times, it was a druidic holy place whose water also carried curative powers. It was a source of life for other reasons, too, providing freshwater a stone's throw from the salt-water bay.

As I stood there imagining all the people who had come to that well for thousands of years, seeking water for daily sustenance as well as physical and spiritual healing, time seemed to collapse. The past, present, and future were an equal reality, held together in infinite stillness.

That is what I think of when I pray the opening collect for All Saints' Day, affirming that God has "knit together" the faithful in "one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of God's Son Christ our Lord." This sense of union with Christ and with all humanity across time and space is a transcendent reality that defies understanding but also provides solid ground for the spiritual journey.

St. Finian's well is an appropriate image for this feast day because before Pope Gregory designated November 1 as All

Saints Day in 837, it was known for centuries as Samhain, the first day of the Celtic year, considered the “thinnest” time when the “veil between time and eternity easily become transparent” and the souls of the departed might pass through.¹

Samhain was the end of the harvest season, when animals were brought down from mountain pastures into barns and homes, when each 24-hour period had increasingly more night than day. For Celtic Christians, the bonfires and laying out cakes for their ancestors honored the daily experience of holding together dark and light, cold and warmth, death and rebirth. Life wasn't easy, but God was present, embracing it on all sides.

All Saints Day encourages us to contemplate the complexities and contradictions of life, its sweetness and its unpredictable, finite nature. The scripture readings today are ones that also shape our Episcopal funeral liturgy, promising that “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God” and one day we will fully know that “the home of God is among mortals, they will be his people, and he will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

We are reminded that Jesus knew deep pain over the death of Lazarus and the grief of Mary and Martha. So even when we are heartbroken over the loss of a loved one, we trust that no one is ever lost to God, that when we die life is changed but not ended.

Today, on the Feast of All Saints, we give thanks for the great cloud of witnesses that surround us, holy people of the past, present and future. We remember the saints who have gone before, the ones with well-known stories, the martyrs and mystics after whom churches are named, including our own St. Stephen. We also remember the ones whose stories are known by only a handful of people, as well as those whose names are lost to the passage of time but whose DNA still shapes our lives.

We also remember the saints of the present day and of the future. In the mystery of divine presence that has no beginning and no end, we have faith that God's creativity endures, inspiring people today and forever to live with compassion, courage, and integrity, serving their neighbors in God's name.

Maybe you know people whose lives bring light and blessing to you and to

¹ Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*.

others; maybe you see them in this community. So, we give thanks today for the saints in our midst and for those who are yet to be born.

The early Celtic church consisted of many small communities, each founded around a monastery. They were concentric circles of belonging, all interdependent and interconnected. At its heart were the family of monks and nuns devoted to the founding saint, then a surrounding community of tenants, artisans, and servants, as well as outlying farmers, tradespeople, and other men and women who supported the monastic community and were supported by them in return. There was a particular attachment to place, of kinship that extended beyond education, wealth, or skill.

Over the last seven months, I have come to appreciate the many concentric circles of participation and commitment to St. Stephen's parish. In addition to the members you might see on Sunday, there are many who call this church home but are unable to attend regularly due to health constraints or travel schedules.

Then there are those who faithfully served the parish in the past but are not drawn to be active now. I have met

some of them and have been told by several that, though they no longer worship here, their heart remains with the community. I sense the abiding power of that. Their gifts of ministry are still part of St. Stephen's DNA, woven with yours, and they will always belong here. And of course, the all-encompassing circle of this parish family are the saints who have died, but whose prayers and faithfulness inform everything we do. Some are inurned in the Resurrection Chapel and the names of many are recorded in the burial registers of the parish.

So today, we remember and honor all these circles of fellowship, the great cloud of witnesses in whose presence we sing, pray, and celebrate the Eucharist. We give thanks to our Creator for their lives and legacy and for the mysterious yet solid reality that we are all knit into one communion, one fellowship of love in which every soul is known and beloved by God, including our own.

Amen.