

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
All Saints Sunday, year 'A'
5 November 2023
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

ET IN ARCADIA EGO

I reread Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* a couple of summers ago, and was astonished at how theological it is. Waugh himself said that it "Deals with what is theologically termed 'the operation of Grace', that is to say, the unmerited and unilateral act of love by which God continually calls souls to Himself."

Early on in the novel the protagonist Charles Ryder finds himself at a great country house—Brideshead—a place he hadn't been in years and which is haunted by memories and spirits of people long gone. "Et in at Acadia ego"—I also lived in Arcadia—he muses as he recalls bittersweet memories. Art Historian Erwin Panofsky said that Arcadia is "An ideal realm of perfect bliss and beauty, a dream incarnate of ineffable happiness, surrounded nevertheless with a halo of 'sweetly sad' melancholy." However, he went on to say the phrase "et in arcadia ego" should properly be translated something like, "Even in Arcadia I, Death, hold sway." And when you think about it, that's what the plot of *Brideshead Revisited* is about since Charles Ryder's life was one of lost love, of grief, of suffering. It's about how even in the midst of his blissful youth—even in Arcadia—death indeed held sway.

We're very blessed to live in this beautiful place and yet, as the names we'll hear in a few moments will clearly prove, even here in this particular Arcadia, death holds sway. Which reminds me of another novel, *Ironweed* by William Kennedy. It takes place at this time of year—on Halloween and All Saints and All Souls days—and has an unlikely hero: Francis Phelan, an alcoholic vagrant who deserted his wife and children twenty years before the story begins. Early on in the narrative, Francis finds himself back in his hometown after many violent and drunken years away. He's desperate for work—so desperate that he's covering fresh graves with dirt. At some point he comes across the graves of his parents and they begin to speak to him, as do lots of others from his chequered past, all of whom he has tried to run away from.

"He had fled the folks because he was too profane a being to live among them," Kennedy writes.

"He had humbled himself willfully through the years to counter a fearful pride in his own ability to manufacture the glory from which grace would flow. What he was was, yes, a warrior, protecting a belief that no man could ever articulate, especially himself; but somehow it involved protecting saints from sinners."

And if ever a man seemed more sinner than saint, it's Francis.

At the end of *Ironweed*, those people who tried to talk to Francis in the graveyard gather in bleachers—as if at a ball game—to watch him, and even cheer him on, as he goes to try to be reconciled with his estranged wife. In his attempt to come to terms with his past, an attempt which is overseen by what scripture would call a great cloud of witnesses, Francis receives the curious and priceless blessing of forgiveness and thereby is sanctified, proving that saints are nothing more—nothing less?—than souls who by grace have been called to be with God.

That scene is a beautiful reminder that each one of us has been created in the image of God and that the end for each of us is eternal blessedness. Therefore we can also affirm what Charles Ryder's lost love Julia says at the end of *Brideshead Revisited*: "However bad I am, God won't quite despair of me in the end." Indeed God will not.

Of course, when we think about saints, especially those whose lives are presented to us in stained glass, painting, poetry, and music, we assume we can never be like them no matter how hard we try, especially since the distance between those who "in glory shine" and we who "feebly struggle" appears to be impossibly vast and seemingly unbridgeable.

Some of you may be familiar with four stone figures carved by Michelangelo for a papal tomb. Even though they're unfinished, they're nonetheless majestic, commanding and powerful, exuding a kind of restless energy. And despite their having little detail, we can still discern human shape and form. But, as I say, they are not complete. John Moses, a former Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, once said of them that "It is as though the figures are still tearing themselves out of the rough stone. They contain the promise of what they might be, but they are still becoming."

"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be not yet been revealed." In other words, we are incomplete, we are unfinished, we still learning, questioning, and growing. It may be difficult to admit this, especially since we want to believe that we've figured life out, have learned the secret to success, and have become self-made people. Yet we know that none of this is entirely true.

Julia says "God won't quite despair of me in the end," but it's *us* who despair in midst of all our struggles, our yearning to be free, our attempts to ignore the reality of death. All those things easily make us forget that God loves us and forgives us and even now is calling us home. It's true that we may not look and act like saints now—at least we may not according to the world's standards. We may even look to be profane. But you and I know that appearances are deceiving. That's the deep truth which this day speaks of. We're all works in progress, some of us more discernably saint-like than others, some more finished than others. But thankfully God's not finished with us. And that's not a reason for despair but rather an occasion for rejoicing. For in the struggling to be free, to be honest, to be authentic, at least a little of what promised future holiness looks like is revealed.

And if the means of being finished seems curiously severe—what the funeral service calls the gate and grave of death—we must not lose sight of the promise that beyond that gate and grave is the place of holy completeness which is the dwelling place of all saints. The place of forgiveness where by God's grace we're called to dwell. The place where it's not death that holds sway but life. The place which is no ideal realm of perfect bliss and beauty, but the true, eternal, and perfect kingdom where not even a tear will mar the perfect faces of joyful blessedness.