

## **ALL SOULS' DAY – 2<sup>nd</sup> NOVEMBER, 2010**

We are all very familiar with the saying that there is nothing certain in life except death and taxes. What a true expression – taxes are not very pleasant to think about, and death even less so. But, we know that death must be accepted as an integral and inescapable part of life. Death accompanies us through life as we face the passing of loved ones and friends, and come, each of us, to face our own mortality. So on this day, All Souls' Day, the Church pauses to reflect on the meaning of our death.

It is a feast which is connected to what we celebrated yesterday, All Saints. There is very little which divides these two solemn commemorations. They form a continued teaching about the entire Church, living and departed. The Church is very wise to encourage us to mark these commemorations together, for it helps us to break down what is an artificial separation and distortion about the members of the Church. The Church is One, we say in the Creed, this means there is not a Church of the living which is separated from the Church for the departed.

What happens to us when we die? It is such a common question when we are children, but we soon grow away from asking the question openly, but it is still within each of us. There is a rather silly joke: "What do you call an atheist in a coffin?" The answer is, of course, "All dressed up and nowhere to go". It's a bad joke, I admit, but it does provide a starting point for considering some answers to the deep questions we have about death: "Where do we go?" "Are the dead at rest?" "At peace?" "Are they happy?" "Will I ever see them again?"

As always, let us turn to the Bible. First, from the Old Testament book of Wisdom, a book written in Alexandria where there were thriving Greek and Jewish communities. Wisdom was written by the Jewish community to justify their beliefs in God in the face of the learned Greek and pagan society around them. In it are some bold statements in answer to questions about death. "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God." "No torment touches them." "They are at peace." The underlying theme is that we need not worry too much about the state of those who have died, for God's loving care for us extends even beyond death.

And in the New Testament, in his letter to the Romans Paul recalls a central teaching of our faith. Indeed, Martin Luther made it the central platform of his theology: God loves us more than we could ever merit. It is a free and genuine love that was best seen in Jesus' willingness to lay down His life for us, even though we are in no position to deserve such love and devotion. Yet it is given freely to us.

Then in John's Gospel are so many of the most comforting of passages concerning grieving about loved ones, and our questions about their state of being after death. We know that our dearly departed loved ones were no saints, but too often we get filled with ideas of a religion that speaks more of judgement than mercy and love. So we yearn to hear something assuring about the future of the souls of the ones we mourn. There can be no more comforting words than those spoken by Jesus: "This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day".

So here we have it: the teaching about the loving and eternal embrace of God; the intensity of the love with which we are loved. And then in the Gospel words of our Saviour that nothing shall be lost.

One of the most moving parts of the Confirmation liturgy is when the bishop says to each candidate, "God has called you by name and made you his own". It is a moving declaration for each new disciple that God knows us by our name, and lovingly calls us home to him. And in him we will rise again – but that rising will not be as some sort of ongoing cosmic soup. When we are called by name, our identity is upheld and conserved. Remember the story Jesus told of Dives and Lazarus and the different states they found themselves in after death, but both of them retained their full identity as in this life and their memories of their loved ones in this life.

So when we meet again those we love but see no longer, we will know each other, because God knows us, calls us by name. Thus, our personal relationships, our friendships, our personality and our love for each other will not disappear. Rather, it will blossom, because it will be transformed and enhanced by being wrapped in the source of all love, God himself.

That wonderful pope of the 1960s, John XXIII, used to say, "Dead? They're not dead; they've gone home, just around the corner; they're waiting for you", and our worship tonight expresses our confidence in the union of the departed with God and our living union with them. Every Eucharist expresses this faith, for this is the meal of the resurrection. In the Eucharist, we participate in the great communion which includes the saints, martyrs and confessors, as well as all who have fallen asleep in Christ throughout the ages. In this service the whole Church is once again in communion – the living, the departed and the blessed saints in light. And to worship at the Eucharist is the most important way we can remember our faithful departed, and be united with them. For those of us who still walk this earth, it is a foretaste of that loving embrace which awaits us all, as God calls us by name and welcomes us home.

We are to live our lives in joyful anticipation of the promised life that is to come. For our deceased loved ones, and for us, the best is yet to come, for if God is love – the only adequate description ever offered of him – then the most loving gift he could give any of when we cross over to that other shore is reunion on that shore with those whom we have loved in this life.

Could paradise be paradise if it were not so?

Rest eternal grant unto our departed loved ones, O Lord – and may your light perpetual shine upon them.

—Fr John Spooner