

*Sermon: All Souls' Day 2008...*

Today is All Souls, the day on which for a thousand years Christians have remembered in their prayers the names of those whom we love but see no longer. There are two parts to this: first the recollection of the ones who have died; and then what that recollection does to us who are left. To speak of the dead raises problems. Where are they precisely? And what form do they have now that they have shuffled off this mortal coil?

We must understand that when we die we leave the earthbound realm of time and space. So when we ask *where* our mother is who has died, or our wife or husband or child, we are speaking analogically. As St Augustine taught us, when God made the world he made time and space with it. When we die we leave this temporal plane and pass into the eternal – into what the church calls the nearer presence of God. Don't think your loved ones are nowhere. Think of them as enjoying this nearer presence of God. For that is the truth.

Find comfort in the knowledge that our apparent separation from them *is only* apparent. The church speaks of the church on earth and the church in heaven. Our Lord said to the penitent thief: *This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise*. The *Letter to the Hebrews* says lovingly, consolingly, *Seeing we are compassed about by so great a cloud of witnesses*. So go ahead and use your imagination when you think of these loved ones. St Paul said *Now we see through a glass darkly*. Well, we can think of our loved ones on the other side of that mirror. The point is that the living and the dead are both alike in the presence of God. Without God's continuous presence, we here on earth would have no being. And whatever the form taken by those who have gone before us, they too enjoy that form only because of God's everlasting love for them.

And know this: our families and friends who have died have entered more fully than we into truth, beauty and goodness. First, truth. You can really believe that your loved ones have being and that they are safe. You can know this because Jesus Christ promised it in some of the most wonderfully tender words in the Gospel:

*Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.*

That coming which Our Lord promises happens to each one of us when it is our turn to die, to step outside time and space and to put our hands into the hands of Jesus who once strode out to Calvary for us.

Secondly, at death we enter into the fullness of beauty. This is no business of mouldy earth and the rotting shroud. Hear the promise of St John the Divine:

*And he showed me a pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it and on either side of the river was there the tree of life...*

And thirdly, we enter into a greater goodness, into perfect love:

*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things have passed away.*

So you see it is not, as people sometimes say, the dead who have *passed away*. It is the temporal bonds and restrictions, time and space, pain and crying and death itself which have passed away. So when you grieve for your departed, don't feel sorry for them. They are safe. And you have God's promise that you will see them again.

Now I come to the second part – what this recollection of the dead does to us who are left. When someone near to us dies, we have to organise the funeral. Many bereaved people I have visited to help with this say to me that they hope they won't break down at the funeral. And I say to them: *But that is what the funeral is for*. You should not stifle your feelings. If you try to strangle your grief, it will come back and haunt you for a long time to come and in all sorts of unhelpful and neurotic ways.

The bereaved find that other people, friends and family, are a great comfort at the funeral. They rally round. In the days after the bereavement, they make sure that the bereft is not left alone. But the pain and shock starts after the funeral. Friends, having done their bit, are anxious to draw a line and, in that tacky media phrase, *to move on*. They are embarrassed. They think the bereaved person will not like to talk about the one who has died. They fear an awkward scene: he might burst into tears. But this is just the time when your bereaved friend needs you – to talk about the happy times in the past, to remember the deceased with joy. By speaking openly and plainly of the dead, grief is transformed into thanksgiving for the life you shared with your loved one.

But of course the bereaved person will find herself alone for long stretches. It's not always for the best to search for diversions: the merry widow is, after all, a famously comic character. But in the solitariness of your own room, take out the old holiday photographs and look back over the life you shared. Give thanks for that life. Pray for the repose of the soul of the one who has died. Talk out loud to that person if you like. This is perfectly normal and a natural, loving thing to do – for remember both living and dead are still in the presence of the one God.

People ask me, *When will I get over it?* And if you listen to the parasitical grief counsellors, there is a technique for getting over it – the so-called *four stages of grief*. It's rubbish. Hurtful. Inhuman. The true answer is *You will never get over it*. What would it say about the life you had shared for years if you could somehow exorcise it and set it aside? You cannot get over it, but by your prayers, your tender recollections and your thanksgiving for the life you had together, you can turn your sorrow into something wholesome and strong.

Bereaved people feel guilty. They wring their hands: *I could have done more for her... If only...* And then there are the bitter recollections of, as Mr Eliot says:

*Things ill done and done to others' harm which once we took for exercise of virtue.*

Of course you will feel guilty because you had that row and now you can't say sorry. But you can say sorry! Do it then! And learn to distinguish between neurotic guilt and genuine regret for some hurt you did. And make the recollection of the unhappy times part of your daily confession of sins to your Heavenly Father.

As we remember with love and thanksgiving our dear ones who have died, let us take strength and courage from the truth of the Gospel and from the triumphant words of St Paul:

*I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come; nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord. Amen.*