

# Sermon for All Saints & All Souls

It is autumn and we sit and talk by the fire. The fire is provided courtesy of our guests today from the Worshipful Company of Fuellers. And we come to celebrate the Saints in light. Remember – without the Fuellers, there would *be* no light! The saints are simply those who love God in the sense that they are passionate about God, devoted, obsessed – *consumed* – is a better word. And because they are so much in love with God, they get closer to Him and He provides them with halos to save them being too dazzled by the light. St Augustine famously prayed, *Lord, make me chaste and continent – but not yet*. That’s all right then, because you can’t be declared a saint until you’re dead. But we all die and we are not all saints. So the faith follows All Saints’ Day with All Souls’ which is the commemoration of all the departed: good, bad and indifferent.

So today each of remembers someone from his own family and friends. I shall remember my father, with whom I did not always see eye to eye; and my Auntie Doris with whom I did. Whom will you remember? And how will you remember them? The lovely gospel for today says *Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted*.

I want to say something about mourning because something has gone seriously wrong with the public expression of this virtue. And mourning is a virtue. It is a work of grace. It is something we have to *learn*. But it seems recently to have been taken over by something else, something unwholesome and because unwholesome, destructive. Soren Kierkegaard said, *There is a notice in Copenhagen forbidding spitting in the street. One could wish for a similar prohibition on sentimentality*. It has been the same in England over these last few weeks when the country seems to have embarked on an orgy of mawkishness. First, this centred on the infant Charlotte Wyatt..

Then came the news of the murder of Mr Bigley who, thanks to the phoney ingratiating of the media’s instant intimacy, was called by millions who never knew him *Ken*. This covered all the front pages, with acres more featuring the vile details inside. The “serious” broadsheets nowadays have adopted the lurid style made famous by *The News of the World* in the 1950s: *DISGUSTING REVELATIONS OF DEBAUCHERY – see exclusive pictures on pages one to fifteen*. The TV reports are like one long bilious attack. On the Saturday after Mr Bigley’s murder, the SKY reporter standing on a windswept pier head and saying, *The question everyone is asking is how Liverpool will cope with this tragedy*. The question everyone was asking? Were you asking that question? I wasn’t and I don’t think others were asking it either.

Next we heard of the murder of fourteen year old Danielle Beccan in Nottingham who was everywhere described as *innocent* of course and whose death we were meant to regard as especially appalling because she was *on her way home from a funfair*. But Danielle’s murder would have been just as wicked, just as much cause for outrage and sadness if she’d been a junkie on her way from the nightclub to God knows where. Everyone, delightful or debauched is a child of God.

Finally – I say *finally* but, as I write, the day is yet young – there came news of the death of John Peel. No doubt he was a much-regarded disc-jockey and broadcaster, but did his unfortunate death really require a full eight minutes’ first item on the main news and a message to the nation from the Prime Minister telling us how sad to feel?

Let me say that all these reported events were extremely sad and that they involved individual human beings and their families – *souls*, as we say today – who were and are in the thoughts and prayers of those close to them. But a blatant exhibition of bleeding hearts hysteria adds nothing except shame and insincerity to those awful events. If we are all supposed to suffer intense emotional agonies each time we hear of the death of a stranger – in fact every day – what feelings are left to us when our mother dies, our wife or our sister, our daughter?

To read the papers these days and watch the news is to picture the whole population at a Diana Festival; to imagine that the favourite pastime of the British public is to read death notices, watch funerals and take time off now and again to go to the door and throw teddy bears at passing hearses. And if you refuse to join this mawkish jamboree you are regarded as heartless. But it is all a sham. It is sentimentality: that is working up in oneself emotions one does not actually have. Faking it. No one could live their lives at the pinnacle of extreme feeling whipped up by the mass media for profit. And one would not be a saint but a fool to aspire to such gross outpourings of inappropriate grief.

The truth is that true feelings and genuine responses have to be learnt along with everything else worthwhile. And so the worst aspect of Danielle’s death was what they made her school-friends do. They all had to *write a poem* of course. Then they set up a *Danielle Day* and a little girl came on *Radio Four* and said, *Every year on this day we will remember Danielle*. But they won’t. It will be forgotten. And teachers will have to scurry around saying, *Ooh, I forgot – it’s Danny’s day!* I know this: I spent five years teaching in a downtown comprehensive. Danielle’s classmates were not receiving the education of their feelings when they were taught those maudlin responses: rather they were being deprived of the emotional and spiritual tools required to cope with their distress. But what is there left for teachers to say in an education system which has abandoned the Christian faith?

As the devil is the ape of God, so sentimentality is the counterfeit of true tenderness and real sympathy. It does no good to the victims and it destroys the moral integrity of those who practise it. Continuous and excessive bouts of media-induced sentimental response do not soften our hearts but harden them. There is a surfeit and we sicken. Thousands die every day the world over. It is insincere and the opposite of true grief to weep for all of them. Why? – because it is impossible.

So what is it truly to mourn? Jesus Wept – and he wept when he learnt Lazarus his friend had died. We see him weeping when he meets the woman and her dead son *her only son – and she was a widow*. We may see the Lord weeping over his beloved City because it had forsaken God. We may see Jesus’ tears as he hears the confession of the penitent thief on the Cross. In all these cases, grief is specific, personal and local. Moreover it is proportionate and constructive. And so it should be with us. There is too much claiming to love all mankind while hating our next door neighbour. But God does not command you to love the whole world. He commands you to love those he

has put next to you – and perhaps especially those you're not particularly fond of. If you will not mourn for your neighbour whom you have seen; how will you mourn for Mr Bigley whom you have not seen?

Today we pray for the souls of our family and friends departed. Those near to us. See them now in the nearer presence of God and love them all the more and be thankful for them. But pray also that God will so order our feelings that we learn the true pity, love, sorrow, grief and mourning shown to us by Jesus Christ. Then we shall learn that it is blessed to mourn – and then we shall be comforted.