

All Souls address, 2.11.25 (Rev J Shakespeare)

Tonight we gather, on this All Souls day, to do something vital- to remember, to give thanks + to pray for the souls of our loved ones. ... But we do it this the context of worship, daring to trust in the Christian hope of resurrection and eternal life- open to the mysterious possibility of faith: faith that despite our sadness, 'neither death nor life will be able to separate us from the love of God' and from our departed brothers & sisters in + through Him.

As the Collect for All Souls puts it: 'God, grant us, with all the faithful departed, the sure benefits of your Son's saving passion and glorious resurrection, that, in the last day, we may with them enjoy the fullness of your promises.'

What I want to do here, in these words, is simply to reflect – with the help of some poetry and words from the Bible – on two profound but intensely real aspects of our human experience. That we need (firstly) to be real about the pain of loss, and (secondly) that life and death are, in fact, intimately interwoven, and we need to open the eyes of our faith in order to share more fully in the mystery of resurrection.

1. So firstly, our need to be real about the pain of loss, our grief at losing those whom we loved, and who gave us life.

Something I have come to believe profoundly, from my own life experience and ministry is that it is right and good and necessary to grieve well. And that whilst painful and at times heart-wrenching, the landscape of loss is something we must go through – courageously acknowledging our grief – if we are to come through, as renewed people. Unlike our culture today, which fears death and skirts over the surface of suffering and grief, we must allow ourselves (and each other) to grieve well and to face the darkness.

Alfred Lord Tennyson is one of many poets who helps put into words this incomprehensible experience, writing 'In Memoriam' after the death of a dear friend and using his surroundings to sound out his darkened soul:

'Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasped no more-
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly through the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

Our short text earlier from Psalm 130 captures, again, this landscape of pain and loss: 'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!'

And the contemporary Christian poet Ann Lewin identifies one key aspect of loss, namely the loss of familiar landmarks and rhythms, in that disorientating phase of not knowing ourselves anymore:

'On this stage of the journey
There are no landmarks.
Though many have gone before,
They have left no maps,
No indications of what to expect...

Times ceases to count, as
Reference points fade to
Insignificance, night
Merges with day, winter
With summer, as the rhythm of life is Lost.'

We need, ancient wisdom tells us, to be real about the pain of loss and to grieve well, as a necessary phase in the road to renewal and resurrection.

For as Mary Magdalene and the disciples found, peering into the empty tomb – where Jesus had been laid – on that first Easter morning, only in facing the darkness, mysteriously, do we open ourselves to rediscovering the light: of God's hidden presence with us. Only then do we discover, waiting on the Lord, the One who "shall renew [our strength]... [enabling us to] mount up with wings like eagles... [to] run and not being weary, walk and not being faint."

So our need to be real about the pain of loss...

2. +Then secondly, the insight that life and death are, in fact, intimately interwoven, and our need to open the eyes of our faith in order to share more fully in the mystery of resurrection.

A few years ago I travelled north to Lancashire to witness an amazing play, written by a friend, called 'Illumination' and it was a play about the life and death of St Cuthbert, the 7th century Northumbrian saint and lover of nature, who inspired centuries of Christian witness and whose body was eventually laid to rest at Durham Cathedral... And what was amazing about the play was the way it depicted the Celtic belief that life and death, and heaven and earth, are intimately interwoven, and that (at best) we make sense of our life – and our memories of those whom we love – living life whole-heartedly within the adventure of faith.

It was striking how St Cuthbert, amazing saint that he was, appeared to have an even greater influence on people after he died, than while he lived. And the play seemed to invite us into a deeper pilgrimage of faith, living not separate from, but connected to the mysteries of earth and heaven, life and death, mortality and eternity – and to those whom we love, but are separate from by the narrow horizon of death.

Ann Lewin puts it like this in another of her poems, contrasting two different perceptions and ways of responding:

'Death – terminus,
Heart-stopping jolt
At the end of the line?
Or junction, where worlds meet,
Faith catching the connection?'

Sometimes nature presents a key, as we observe its cycles of death and rebirth, of autumn, winter and spring, and as we notice and feel its contrasting moods: allowing the creation to speak into our hearts.

I remember once having the privilege of attending the funeral of a friend and much loved priest, in Leicestershire, who, despite the ravages of Parkinson's disease, held firm to his belief in the resurrection, in the horizon of eternity beyond the limitations of mortality.

And at the high point of his funeral, when the prayers were offered, a beautiful butterfly encircles his coffin, before – at the end of the service – following him out and into the clear day outside the church...

As the poet T S Elliot, alluding to death and rebirth, puts it, with similar echoes of natural harmony, and of words the late medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich:

'We shall not cease from our exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown remembered gate...

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.'

We need, with William Wordsworth, to glimpse in nature 'intimations of immortality', whether in childhood or old age, in joy or in sorrow; drawn to participate in the life that is not just ephemeral but eternal.

St Paul, like the Psalmist, allows the gift of faith to lead him from pain & grief to new life & hope: and in response to the question, 'who will separate us from the love of Christ – hardship, distress, persecution, peril or sword'; he affirms whole-heartedly (out of his experience): 'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Life and death and eternal life are all connected, and having embraced the landscape of grief and loss, we are offered the opportunity of faith: trusting that in God and in through Son Jesus Christ, the horizon of death is – in the end – no ultimate barrier, but (both now and hereafter) a gateway to life, for us and for those whom we love. For as Jesus himself says, in the Gospel of John, "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."

And as Dylan Thomas writes, with courage and deep conviction-

'And death shall have no dominion.
No more may gulls cry at their ears
Or waves break loud on the seashores;
Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain...
And death shall have no dominion.'

Amen