

1st November 2012 – All Souls Day

Is 25:6-9, Ps 23, 1 Thess 4:13-18, Jn 6:37-40

18:00 Grahamstown Cathedral

God's love and power extend over all creation. Every life, including our own, is precious to God. Christians have always believed that there is hope in death as in life, and that there is new life in Christ after death. But, even those who share such faith, find that there is a real sense of loss at the death of a loved one which continues long after the funeral service.

The yearly All Souls service is the church's attempt to acknowledge that grief is a dynamic process which may not have a clear ending. Here in this service, we are offered space to continue the journey of grief as we acknowledge our loss and our sorrow again. Here we find safe space to reflect on our own mortality. And most importantly we come in thanksgiving to be infused with hope as we refuse to forget the Resurrection of Christ.

I must confess that in my own short life I have not had to deal with the death of a close family member. However, several years ago my close friend and mentor, Tim Wright, died. I had ministered to him in hospital but was away at a wedding on the night when he died. I remember receiving that call and being pained that I couldn't go to the hospital and be around for the prayers said at the point of death.

At the time I was fortunate to work as a youth pastor under a very caring and insightful priest, who remains a close friend. Fr. Nic invited me to go with him to the undertakers so that I could view Tim's body. I will never forget the feelings of emptiness and disappointment evoked by that experience. As long as I had known Tim he had worn a beard, those who prepared the body had decided to shave him... This was no longer Tim. More than that, I sensed very powerfully that the soul, the essence of Tim was no longer there.

Tim was an environmentalist and had a deep love for the created order. Several months after the funeral I drove out to a wilderness area with the intention of trying to process some of my grief. As I sat and absorbed the birdsong which Tim knew so well I just began to talk as though Tim were sitting beside me... similar to the way in which I talk to God. My protestant Christian upbringing had always made it clear to me that communication with the dead was taboo and certainly not to be practiced. Yet there I was sitting in the bush and talking to Tim, my late friend, and I felt as if he was listening.

I tell you this part of my own story because it illustrates well the popular belief of an eternal soul separating from the body at death and going to be with God in some way we can't fully explain. Yet this has never been the orthodox Christian belief. As Rowan Williams states:

In the Apostles' Creed... we say we believe in 'the resurrection of the body' — or rather, in the original, 'the resurrection of the flesh'... Do we actually want this particular lump of bone and fat and hair that we know so well to have an eternal future? And isn't there a hint of something, well, rather creepy about such language? It is one of the hardest doctrines to state convincingly in the present climate... Christian faith says that since God has come to encounter us in this world of material bodies, as a material body, and since God continues to use material things and persons to communicate who and what he is, we can't suppose that life with him will ever simply sidestep our material life.

Williams continues by asserting that:

The gospel treats us seriously, in our wholeness; it promises a new world and it directs us to the central story of a bodily saviour whose material flesh and bones are not left around in the world but raised and transfigured into something recognizably continuous with earthly life, yet dramatically different... If God holds on to us through death, he holds on to every aspect of us not just to a specially protected, 'immortal' bit of us.

Perhaps it may be helpful to think about our physical death in the same way as a seed which falls to the ground and dies. This kind of dying is also a birthing process where the seed is not lost, but is transformed into a thing of life and beauty. We may not associate a stunning flower with a drab seed, yet the two are intimately connected. This cycle of death and life is repeated throughout our lives.

We must surrender the comfort and warmth of the womb for this world. Children must let go of the sand pit and the jungle gym in order to gain the experience of school and university. Single people must sacrifice some of their freedom in order to enter into a romantic relationship. Our lives are suffused with death like experiences which are really opportunities for greater and more abundant life. Our physical death is yet another transition into greater and more abundant resurrection life.

Since the resurrection of Jesus, the church insisted on the burial of the dead. In the 1940's cremation started to replace burial and has become the popular alternative. However, burial and cremation are not equal choices. I think that cremation would better be understood as a preparation for burial and not as a kind of alternative to burial. As John Lampard, the Methodist liturgist says:

I would like to see all the Churches moving towards insisting that cremated remains must be buried. The theological conviction, which underlies that discipline, is the traditional understanding that the body has an integrity about it, which is not diminished either in death or by cremation. In this we can hear an echo of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which is symbolized by the return to the earth, from which we come, of all human remains.

With the rise in environmental awareness, the cremation process is coming under increased scrutiny. Studies have indicated that there is a huge amount of fuel required, an enormous amount of (coffin) wood is consumed and vast amounts of heat and carbon are released into the atmosphere. In response to this, the UK has seen a significant rise in what has come to be known as green or woodland burial. In woodland burial a tract of land is set aside and the natural vegetation is encouraged to flourish. There are no neat rows of graves and no gravestones, rather a particular tree or rock becomes the reminder of the grave site.

I suspect that for many of us, our grief is more like the organic woodland burial sites than our highly structured gravesites or gardens of remembrance. Psychology has given us wonderful insights which help us to name and therefore have some kind of power over our phases of grief. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is well known for her five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. However, our grief is seldom a linear experience that starts with denial and ends with acceptance after 6 months or even 6 years. Grief is fluid, dynamic, seasonal and sometimes surprises us when we least expect it. To grieve 'well' does not, I think, come naturally. Rather we need to work at it and learn from others who have engaged with their grief. Therefore, I invite you to pray your goodbye to your loved one as I lead us in a form of imaginative prayer inspired by Joyce Rupp:

Close your eyes, imagine taking your loved one by the hand and leading him/her to the God of all compassion. Place the hand of your loved one in God's hand and encourage him or her to go where God leads. As you entrust your loved one to God, share with him or her how thankful you are for their life... perhaps you also need to give or receive forgiveness.

Then turn to God and ask for strength and courage to face the times of desolation, loneliness and despair. Trust in God to bring you and your loved one together again in the fullness of time.

Feel the gentle yet firm embrace of God, become aware of God's tears and know that God cares for you and your loved one more than you previously thought possible...

Amen