

Sunday 3rd November 2013		ALL SOULS DAY	
Grahamstown Cathedral			
7 p.m.			
Isaiah 25:6-9	Psalm 23	1 Thess 4:13-18	
		John 6:37-40	
Held in love			

November is the month of remembering: All Saints Day (1st November); All Souls Day (2nd November); and Remembrance Sunday, which we shall be observing next Sunday. And of course there is Guy Fawkes Day – “remember, remember the 5th of November” – the great gunpowder plot, when Guy Fawkes and others attempted to blow up the entire Houses of Parliament in 1605.

Tonight is a time when we commemorate the faithful departed; when we remember loved ones.

LOSS, GRIEVING AND DEATH

The death of a loved one is probably one of the hardest things we ever face. For Claire and me, this certainly has been a year of that, with the death of my father and Claire’s mother, as well as the sudden deaths of a number of close friends. And many here tonight – most of us – have known the deep sadness and grief when a dear family member or friend dies. Certainly it is something that everyone faces at some time or another. It is often said that there are two certainties in life – income tax; and death. While some might try to duck and dive to avoid SARS, no amount of ducking and diving will help us avoid death.

Some deaths may seem from the outside – and I say this with caution – easier to cope with than others. There is the death of a beloved, elderly parent, who has lived a full and rich life. In many ways, while there is immense sadness and loss, there is hopefully also the sense of completion. A life well lived, for which we give thanks. Even as I say this, I know that my father’s death, while not unexpected, was for me both unbelievable, and overwhelming – and very hard.

Far harder, I think, is tragic death, sudden death, the death of a child or young person – and we think of the many people who die in car accidents; or the victims of the Nairobi shootings or suicide bomb attacks; or those who take their own lives; or children caught in gangster cross-fire; the terrible grieving and regret and “if only”. Much grace is needed for those who lose loved ones in such circumstances.

But death and loss are also often experienced in other ways: the death of a dream, the death of hopes, lost opportunities. Closed doors.

It is perhaps not surprising, when we see and experience the extent of loss and grief, that for some it leads to fortune tellers, or to sangomas, or to slim-mannetjies, or to those who promise to put us in touch with those who have died; or to crossing-over TV programs; or to those who say they can contact the spirits.

FAITH IN THE RESURRECTION

As Christians, the way we face death and loss is shaped by our belief in the resurrection.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah looks forward to what God will do in Christ:

“On this mountain the Lord will destroy that veil shrouding all the peoples... He will destroy death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face” (Is 25:7-8).

Psalm 23 reminds us that

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil: for you are with me, your rod and your staff comfort me.” (Ps 23:4)

1 Thessalonians tells us that

“you should not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again; so too will God bring those who died as Christians to be with Jesus.” (1 Thess 4:13-14)

1 Corinthians:

“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Cor 15:20)

WAITING

Much of our faith has this sense of looking forward in hope to what will happen. Waiting for the time when things will become clear. Waiting for the coming of God into a situation of hardship and despair and desolation. Waiting for the coming of the kingdom. Waiting for the resurrection. Waiting for the seed to sprout, for the tree to bud. Waiting for new life to emerge.

“Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully...” (1 Cor 13:12)

We live in this in-between time, this time of waiting, when things often don't make sense, when life isn't fair, when there aren't easy answers – when there aren't *any* answers, but only confusion and silence. This theme of waiting is often found in the psalms:

“How long O Lord will you so utterly forget me: how long will you hide your face from me? How long must I suffer anguish in my soul and be so grieved in my heart day and night: how long shall my enemy triumph over me? (Ps 13:1-2)

“Yet I put my trust in your unfailing love: O let my heart rejoice in your salvation...” (Ps 13:5)

The challenge, the hard part, is for this time of waiting, this time of grieving and loss, to become a time of hope, when we learn to trust –

when we learn to trust more deeply, in the face of death; and in this time of waiting to discover that the love of God does hold us, that the love of God does hold our loved ones; and that God does indeed hold our dreams and our hopes and our longings, in his love.

CONCLUSION

Tonight, we remember before God, with great love, all who have died, knowing that the love of God is holding us – and that we are joined in a very special way in worship with all who have gone before us in Christ. As we say in the words of the Eucharist, “Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven...” We share in this sacred meal and in this worship with those we see around us, and with those who we can no longer see.

“It is [the Father’s] will that I should not lose even one of those he has given me, but should raise them all up on the last day.” (Jn 6:39)