

Homily – All Souls’ Day 2018

“Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”

✠In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hope, as Paul says, is not deceptive. We are too often led by secular attitudes to deny the existence of death on the one hand, and to see it as a terribly final denial of life on the other. So it is that non-believers would see what we are doing this evening as at best a source of comfort, and, at worse, a seeking after a cathartic release from the fear of death and the pain of loss. Well, there is no denying that we take comfort from these masses of All Souls’ Day, and from all the other times that we remember the dead, but there is far more to it than that.

If the liturgy speaks of our hopes for those whom we have loved and lost in terms of seeking for them a place of refreshment, light and peace, a closer look at our prayers sees other words describing the life of the world to come: eternal life, the fullness of eternal joy, the joys and blessings of the life to come. It all sounds very dynamic, very much in keeping with the bountiful and creative mercy of the God who has revealed himself to us throughout salvation history. The truth of the matter is, and this is the teaching of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the truth is that life goes on, and that those in heaven, and those in Purgatory waiting to get in there are all bound together in one living fellowship of faith and community. Yes, the community of faith extends beyond time into the world to come.)

If we think about this for a moment, we see that our relationships with those who have gone before are still alive, still going on, still relevant. We may have lost someone, but they are still in our lives, not just as a moral and affective residue, but as a living spiritual presence. It is not just the saints who are present for us, it is all the faithful departed. When we come here with our particular act of remembering, we are joyfully deepening relationships that have changed in circumstance, but not in essence. Not only shall we all meet again, but we continue to live in a bond of community and prayer which transcends the material world and binds heaven and earth together. An atheist bereavement counsellor will seek to get the bereaved to accept that their loved one is no more. The Christian faith, on the other hand, encourages us to do something different: to move on to develop the new relationship where the voice of our

love is lifted up by the love of God, and speaks words of love in the world to come. It may be that we have lost someone in a way that hurts us because the relationship ended badly or we never said something that we wanted to say. It may be that someone left us too early, or suffered too much for us to cope. It doesn't matter. The joy of our faith is that our link with them has not been lost, but carries on, and as we turn our hearts to them, we know that they will be aware of our love and our care.

I hope that this is true not just of those who I treasure personally, but also of the others who we embrace in prayer: in my case, those whose funerals I conduct but who I never met; the dead from the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh; the dead of the two world wars; the dead from terrorist attacks too numerous to remember... whatever, whoever... whoever is in your heart... whoever the Holy Spirit invites you to pray for.

Death is not final. Death is not anything other than the next stage of the life which we have been given. This life is in itself destined for immortality and all human aspiration has heaven as its ultimate goal and as its daily source of inspiration and energy. Our loved ones are with us in spirit, the saints and angels surround us with joy and tenderness. We do not need to ask who will roll away the stone of the tomb for us. It has already been done, the Lord has done it, and where he has gone, we are already known, loved and accepted, along with all those for whom we shall pray this evening. And so this community, part of the Church Militant, turns its heart to those who await resurrection in Christ, and seeks with them the company of the angels and saints, who, even now, surround us with their prayers and their encouragement. If we do bring sadness here with us tonight, we do so to have it turned into love, faith and joy in the light of the resurrection. Amen.