

Heaven in Our Hearts: Sermon Preached at St John's Devizes, Sunday 30th October 2022 (Commemoration of the Departed for All Souls')

Readings – Isaiah 52: 7–10; Luke 24: 13–31

*“Now all the world she knew is dead
In this small room she lives her days
The wash-hand stand and single bed
Screened from the public gaze.”*

The poem 'House of Rest' is not one of Betjeman's more famous poems, but it is a lovely and profound one. It describes the life of a very infirm rector's widow living in a nursing home. She spends her days living in her memories of the husband and children with whom she once shared an active, happy, life.

*“Lincoln, by Valentine and Co.,
Now yellowish brown and stained,
But there some fifty years ago
Her Harry was ordained;*

[...]

*Aroused at seven, to bed by ten,
They fully lived each day,
Dead sons, so motor-bike-mad then,
And daughters far away.”*

Death is part of all of our lives, yet we dislike contemplating it. That's why we're so keen to use euphemisms to describe death – passing away, departing from us – but death is as unavoidable and as real as it gets.

Funerals over recent decades have, on average, become much more jolly affairs, much more inclined to be celebrations of life than means of helping people process the overwhelming cocktail of experiences and emotions that proximity to death involves. It is almost as if a society where few people really believe in an afterlife doesn't want to deal with how final and overwhelming death is.

Yet, apart from anything else, death is a terrible wound on those left behind, even when it happens to be a mercy on the deceased. When someone we love dearly dies, their absence hurts us for many years, indeed often for the rest of our lives. We never lose that sense of wishing to be with them.

For CS Lewis, praying for the dead was a natural and obvious instinct. He responded to those Christians who don't believe that prayer for the dead is meaningful or desirable in this way:

Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to Him?

It is right that we pray to God to have mercy on the dead – partly for its own sake, partly because it should remind us that we too are dependent on God showing mercy on us. But beyond these reasons, keep in mind that prayer is not merely asking God to hear and respond to our requests. To pray for someone is to an act of communion with them – a means of uniting with them through the God who is both the source and the final destination of us all.

The word 'member' can mean a body part; indeed originally that was its only English meaning. Member is a word that came into English, via Norman French, from the Latin word *membrum*, which means limb. The word remember also has its root in this Latin word, *membrum*. So to re-member someone is literally to put their limbs together again, to make them live in our hearts. When we remember the dead, we bring them to life again in us; we create inside our own hearts a little fragment of the communion of saints in Heaven. The irony is that it is only when we truly accept the awful finality and irreversibility of death that we open ourselves to witnessing the Resurrection.

I have always believed that Resurrection is central to understanding the purpose of human existence, and that the evidence for that lies all around us in nature,

from the renewal of the natural world each springtime to the way that new stars are formed from the material produced when old stars die. But evidence that Resurrection is central to our purpose also lies within us, if we care to look at our deepest instincts through the lens of prayer.

Since the very first Easter Sunday, prayer has been the means of grasping the reality of the Resurrection. In tonight's Gospel reading, set on that first Easter Sunday, two followers of Christ, devastated by the death of their hero just forty-eight hours before, fail to recognise for a long time the man who walks along the road to Emmaus with them. Neither the content of what he says nor his physical appearance give Him away; it is only when He breaks bread that the disciples recognise Him. The reality of Resurrection only becomes apparent through prayer.

The pattern of death and Resurrection isn't just seen in individuals and in nature, but also in institutions and social structures. Prayer again is the means of grasping this and its implications for us. Just as the risen Christ clearly had different physical properties than the human body of His earthly life, Resurrection for human societies never means a mere return to what came before.

Our Old Testament reading this evening, from the second part of Isaiah, was written in the traumatic aftermath of the death of a country and its way of life. The Jewish people, or at least their religious and political leadership, had been in exile in Babylon for many decades at the point this passage was written. The Temple that had been at the centre of their world, whose faith and rituals had given them meaning, had been destroyed, seemingly forever. Judging by the text, many thought the idea that they would return to Jerusalem and a new Temple was fanciful nonsense for wishful thinkers. But it was those wishful thinkers who wrote this passage and, as it turned out, they were right. But the Jerusalem they later returned to, even the form of their faith, turned out to be different in many ways from what had existed before. The Exile, the death of their previous lives, had changed them profoundly.

So, the Christian understanding of Resurrection is not mere nostalgia or clinging to the past, nor is it wishful thinking to obscure the reality of death, but an awareness that the world and our lives in it are but one element of the fullness of what we are and the fullness of reality. What we cannot perceive with our five senses moves into focus through prayer.

In Betjeman's poem, prayer is also the solvent between the living and the dead. Too infirm to make it to the nearby market-town parish church – a church that must have been rather like St John's – even hearing its bells ringing on Sunday morning is enough to bring the rector's widow closer to her husband and sons.

*“Now when the bells for Eucharist
Sound in the Market Square,
With sunshine struggling through the mist
And Sunday in the air.*

*“The veil between her and her dead
Dissolves and shows them clear,
The Consecration Prayer is said
And all of them are near.”*

So in a moment we will pray for our loved ones, asking God to grant them eternal rest; we will re-member them, put them together in our hearts and minds, and unite our souls with theirs in the hopeful trust that these brief moments of communion with them in our hearts this evening are merely a foreshadowing the eternity we will spend with them.

And now to God be the glory, the Father the creator of all life, the Son the restorer to new life, the Spirit who breathes in all life, now and forever, as is most justly his due. Amen.