

All Souls' Day, 3rd November 2008.

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges at St Peter's Wolvercote

Readings: Lamentations 3.17-26, 31-33; 1 Peter 1.3-9; John 6.37-40

We have gathered tonight for what is officially called 'the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed'.

Within the Christian church, there is a bewildering range of beliefs about death and about praying for those who have died. In the Eastern Church there are no problems at all about praying for the dead, but in the Western Church things are not so straightforward. This is partly to do with the differing views on 'Purgatory' - that place where those who, at their death, aren't condemned to hell but aren't quite ready for Heaven go to receive such punishment as will render them fit for Heaven. Those who believe in purgatory believe that prayers for the dead will make their journey through purgatory easier, but those who don't believe in it often see no point in praying for the departed, as they will have gone straight to heaven, or to hell.

But with or without 'purgatory' praying for those who have died seems a very basic human instinct. From time immemorial people of different races and cultures have developed rituals - often very elaborate - for the burial of the dead. And, although there is hardly any mention of 'praying for the dead' in the scriptures, there is much archaeological evidence that the members of the early Church prayed for the peace and refreshment of the souls of the departed. By the end of the 10th Century prayers for the dead were part of the church's liturgy, along with a Day of commemoration of the Faithful Departed.

At the Reformation the Anglican Church rejected the idea of Purgatory - especially the way it was *used* by the Roman Catholic Church. Article 22 in the Book of Common Prayer includes'The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory is a 'fond' thing ... vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God'. No wonder, then, that prayers for the dead and the Commemoration of the faithful Departed disappeared from Anglican prayer books.

But they have gradually found their way back ... because, of course, 'Articles', 'official statements of doctrine', cannot suppress human instinct, and the Church of England now accepts this ... 'sort of'! In the guide to the Common Worship Funeral services it says "Prayer for the departed remains a widely contentious issue in the life of the Church of England. The agreed Common Worship policy is that the authorised printed Funeral texts should only contain words and prayers that everyone should feel able to use. There is, however freedom within the rubrics for ministers to choose and use the prayers they consider the most appropriate". In other words, it is one of those wonderful 'fudges' which makes the Anglican Church what it is! ... (if only it could 'hold' all its differences so simply and so lovingly).

We have had to address this 'fudge' here at St Peter's. Some members of the congregation have expressed difficulty with praying for those who have died, and so on our weekly intercessions sheet we suggest 'giving thanks' for, or 'remembering', them. I suspect, however, that many people do find it quite 'natural' to pray for those they love who have died - as natural as praying for those who are still alive. And some people may feel a *need* to do so. Perhaps because now there seems to be nothing else they can do for those they love but are separated from, or, perhaps, because of some uncertainty about the faith of the one who has died. Even in my short ministry I have met a number of people who were afraid that a loved one would not 'go to heaven' because they never expressed any belief in Jesus Christ, and so

they would be 'lost' for ever. The words of the Funeral service don't really offer much reassurance - they all refer to the resurrection joy for those who profess Jesus Christ, for those who '*FEAR THE LORD*'! Wonderful words, of course, for all those who *do* have faith, but surely terrifying for those who are not sure of the faith of the loved one who has died.

But we can find words of reassurance. We could take Jesus's words in Chapter 5 of St John's Gospel. In verses 28 and 29 he speaks of those who are already dead as '*hearing his voice*'. He says that the day is coming when 'all who are in their tombs will hear his voice and come forth – those who have *done good* to the resurrection!' So Jesus seems to say that the moment of death is not the moment of final judgment, and elsewhere he tells us that only he can judge others. He knows the people we love far better than we do, and he will see the good they have done, their true faith.

And we have those wonderful words from Lamentations... "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end... he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone". We can and must trust in those words when we commend those who have died to God.

But, whatever we may feel about praying for the dead, we have *all* come here tonight to remember them and to give thanks for them. We thank God for the many blessings we received through them, especially those we shall remember by name. And we also give thanks that, however it 'works', God gives us a LIVING hope through Jesus Christ. Not some vague hope that consists of 'dead words' that we say but don't really think about, but a *lively, real* hope that inspires us to rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy. The hope that 'God will guide those who have died to springs of the water of life, and wipes away every tear from their eyes'. And the hope that, however painful it may be at the moment to be parted from those we love, when we die we shall find ourselves at those springs of life, reunited with those we love, held in the arms of our God - who **is** love.

Amen.