

All of them are near

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney on All Saints' & All Souls' Sun 1 November 2020
Refs: Revelation 21: 1-6; Matthew 5: 1-12

In our church calendar at this time of year we celebrate All Saints' and All Souls' this morning, and next week Remembrance Sunday, all of which leads us to think about death.

—a subject we don't on the whole find easy and too often tend to avoid.

So today, first, we celebrate All Saints' – the day when we give thanks for the giants of the faith down the ages who leave us such tremendous examples of Christian living, both in their great love for God and in their selfless service to the world. But also people we have personally known and loved who have been as saints for us, who have led us to faith by their example and encouragement and inspired our personal journeys of faith and Christian living

But today we also celebrate All Souls', the day in which we remember those dear people whom we have loved in our lives, and who have died, and give thanks to God for them. Those whose names are read aloud in church, and those whose names remain in the silence of our hearts. We remember them with love and gratitude – though we still continue to miss them with acute pain and deep grief. But they are those for whom we can also rejoice. For as we remember them so we also give thanks, thanks for the privilege and gift of having known them in this life, and thanks for **them**, that now their struggle is over and they are at rest with God. But we mourn for them because we can no longer be with them as we once were – and we continue to miss them daily and deeply.

So, as well as celebrating All Saints', we are also prompted to face, head on, the subject of death. But whether we find this easy or not, this time of year encourages us to think through just what we, as Christians, do believe and feel about death, and to face, and begin to come to terms with, our own death and our own mortality.

Thankfully death is not such a taboo subject as it used to be. But maybe we are still a little reluctant to think about it, and to ponder on it, and to begin to work out how we deal with it.

So we are led to two big questions. How do we face and think about the actual event of death, the death of people we love, and also our own death? And secondly how do we deal with the grief that results from the death of those we love?

Bereavement is perhaps one of the most painful things we ever have to face. It can throw us completely off track and even paralyze us with shock and loss. It can re-define the parameters of our lives and leave us feeling incomplete and lost. How are we, as Christians, to think of death? Basil Hume, in answer to this question, asserts that, "*the deepest promptings of the human spirit whispers that there is more to human life than the pain of years allotted to it – that we search for a different order of reality - with an intuition that death cannot have the last word." And "that surely all our experiences of love must be pointers to another form of life that persists after death. Each experience of love surely carries within it glimpses, and a promise, of an unending existence of pure joy in the presence of the One who is – the one who is love itself."*

So for us, our faith leads us to acknowledge that our limited human understanding must rely on the promises of the Kingdom, of finally seeing God, not through a glass darkly but face to face. And in the sure and certain hope of resurrection and eternal life.

When **we** speak of death we usually speak of it as passing from life to death - and indeed that is true in a physical sense – our bodies do pass from this life and die. But perhaps we, as believers in the resurrection, should rather speak of death as passing from death to life. To the eternal life with God that we are promised. Our faith tells us again and again that death is not an end but rather a beginning, a beginning of new life, a life with Christ that is far beyond our human imaginings.

As we heard in our reading from Revelation, "*Death will be no more- the first things have passed away. See, I am making all things new.*"

So those we have loved and miss so acutely and so painfully, are surely living in eternal life – at peace and face to face with God – surrounded by his love to an extent we cannot imagine. We can be sure that - for them - all is well.

But it leaves us dealing with our grief and often overwhelming feelings of emptiness and loss. Even Jesus felt this deep grief over the death of his friend Lazarus – for we read that when he heard of his death Jesus was '*greatly disturbed and moved –and that he himself - wept*'.

The questions frequently asked by bereaved people – and indeed questions I ask myself - when someone we love has died, "*how can we still feel close to them? how can we still connect with them? How can the gap between the living and the dead be bridged? Shall we ever be with them again?*" Big questions that have no neat answers.

But my experience leads me to believe that it is at the Eucharist that we can feel closest to those for whom we mourn. For it is at every Eucharist that heaven comes closest to earth – that this life comes closest to eternal life. That the life of this world connects most fully with the eternal life to come. John Betjeman describes it beautifully in his poem called "*House of Rest*", a poem which I for one find immensely comforting and very real. Let me end by sharing a few verses.

*Now all the world she knew is dead
In this small room she lives her days
The washstand and the single bed.
Screened from the public gaze*

*Her full grey eyes look far beyond
The little room - and me
To village church - and village pond
And ample Rectory*

*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
Dissolve and shows them clear
The Consecration Prayer is said
And all of them are near*

Amen