

St. Alban's Epping, 6th November 2018, All Souls' Day Commemoration

**COMMEMORATING ALL SOULS
(Job 14:1-14; Psalm 29; Romans 6:3-9; John 5:19-29)**

Last Sunday we celebrated the Feast of All Saints'. We reminded ourselves of the great saints of old who served Christ and his people in outstanding ways. But we were also reminded that as followers of Christ, we all are God's own people, saints, called to live lives of faith and faithfulness and loving service.

This evening we move from All Saints to All Souls, and our emphasis is a particularly personal one. We especially remember those known to us who have died: family members and friends and others whose earthly life has ended, and whom we remember with affection and thankfulness, and perhaps with a tear or two. We thank God for them, and for the way they have touched our lives, and for all those special memories of them. We reflect on their lives, and seek to learn from their examples, and even from their mistakes.

This evening as part of our service, we remember them in prayer. If they were believers, if they are sharing fully in the life of God's kingdom, we might wonder what need they have of our prayers, but this seems to be a way we might remember them before God.

As we think about our readings, we find ourselves taken back to Job and his dreadful suffering. Life was terrible for Job. Life made no sense: God seemed to be punishing him, but he had no idea what he had done to deserve it. Hence life seemed totally unjust. Job's friends were no help at all, and he started crying out to God instead, seeking an explanation for what had happened to him. If life was like this, what did death have to offer?

In the days of the Old Testament, people had the sense that when they died, it wasn't the absolute end. Beyond the grave was *Sheol*, the pit, a place of shadowy half-life. But as Job tried to challenge and question God, he began to wonder whether there might be something more than this shadowy existence. Perhaps there was somewhere where the wrongs of this life and this world would be put right. "If mortals die, will they live again?" he asks in our reading. Most in his time would have said "not in any real sense", but Job begins to wonder whether there is perhaps more. And in some later parts of the Old Testament there are further hints that perhaps there is some greater reality to come.

Of course, with the coming of Jesus there is indeed something new. Jesus experienced death, as he experienced pain and suffering and injustice. To follow him would indeed mean taking up the cross, that instrument of suffering and death.

But as we are reminded every Easter, and indeed every Sunday, for Jesus, death is certainly not the end of the story. He rose triumphant over death.

Paul in our reading from the Letter to the Romans points to the meaning of baptism, which expresses the beginning of the Christian life. As we were reminded on Sunday, the water of baptism speaks of cleansing from sin, and forgiveness, and it speaks of the new life we have in Christ.

In the days of the New Testament, most baptisms involved going right down into the water, almost like drowning or burial. Baptism spoke of death to an old life and the beginning of a new life. It points to the idea that what happened to Jesus will in a particular way happen to us. Like Christ, we die to an old life. Like Christ we live a new life, the life of eternity, the life of the kingdom of God.

Yes, our life on earth as we know it will come to an end one day, but something far more wonderful awaits us in the resurrection. As Jesus puts it in our Gospel reading, whoever believes in him “has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life”. So it is for all who have died in Christ.

When he was writing his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul had heard that there was confusion amongst his readers. They knew that Jesus was to return in glory and that this could happen soon. But some of their number had already died. They would not be there when Jesus returned. Would they miss out? Would they be left behind?

Paul explained to the Thessalonians that when Jesus returns, all his people, whether they have already died, or are alive on earth on that day, all his people will share together in the glory of that day. No one will miss out. Paul told them: “I don’t want you to grieve as people without hope.” Yes, when someone close to us dies, we will grieve. We will miss them. The blessings of that relationship are over, at least on earth. We will be sad.

That is normal. The stiff upper lip is not taught in the New Testament. We may well grieve. But we do not grieve as people without hope. In Christ there is hope. There is the promise of eternal life, of life without limit, of love without end.

So at this All Souls' commemoration, we remember and give thanks for those who have touched our lives in a special way. We are assured that all believers share in the fullness of eternal life. We leave them in God's gracious keeping. We may well grieve, but in Christ we can grieve with hope! Amen.

Paul Weaver