

Project Canterbury

"The Intermediate State, and
Prayer for the Departed."



A SERMON

PREACHED FOR THE GUILD OF ALL SOULS,
AT THE
CHURCH OF S. AUGUSTINE, HAGGERSTON,
BY THE

REV. H. LLOYD RUSSELL,
Vicar of the Church of the Annunciation, Chislehurst,
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This Sermon lays no claim to originality. It has been published at the request of the Council of the Guild of All Souls, who felt that so important a subject treated in a popular and familiar manner might lead members to search into the matter more deeply for themselves. The preacher will be sincerely thankful if this result is obtained.

The Intermediate State and Prayer for the Departed
"They without us should not be made perfect." Hebrew xi. 40.

There is a story told by one of our great preachers of an Indian Officer, who had in his time seen a great deal of service, and had taken part in more than one of those decisive struggles by which the British authority was at length established in the East Indies. [Canon Liddon] He had returned to end his days in this country, and was talking with his friends about the most striking experiences of his professional career. They led him by their sympathy and their questions to travel in memory over a long series of years, and as he described his various adventures, and all the swift alternations of anxiety and hope which a man must feel who is entrusted with the responsibility of commanding, their interest in his story, as was natural, became keener and [3/4] more exacting. At last, however, he paused with this observation--"I expect to see something much more remarkable than anything I have been describing." As he was advanced in years, and was understood to have retired from active service, his listeners did not quite catch his meaning. There was a pause, and then he said in a very solemn undertone, "I mean, *in the first five minutes after death.*" The first five minutes after death! Surely, brethren, the expression is worth remembering, if only as that of a man to whom the life to come was evidently a great and solemn reality. But it is worth something more, for it opens up to us another question which is for ever baffling us. What shall we see the first five minutes after death? Many have asked the question, but who has ever been able to answer it? How glad we should be to know something of the mysterious home of the souls departed, but who has ever sailed to that unknown shore, and returned with tidings of our loved and lost? We often think of them, yes, and even more tenderly than we ever did while they were with us in the flesh. Long dead, and long buried, they yet live deep down in our hearts. Frequently, in the solitude of our chambers, in the stillness of the evening twilight, or in the lonely walk, "they come to [4/5] visit us once more." From their lowly bed, purified and beautiful, we call them up, and in all the reality of life and love they stand before us, or sit beside us, or walk hand in hand with us by the way. Their forms are as clearly outlined, and every feature is as distinctly traced, as when they dwelt among us. We even fancy that their eyes are brighter, and their smiles are sweeter, and their words more tender than they were then. For death has removed all their infirmities and imperfections, and left them beautiful and immortal. But all this is only a fond work of fancy. Our friends are *gone*, and we cannot tell where. We no longer meet them in the street, or among our fellow worshippers. They never visibly join us at morning or evening prayer, nor kneel with us at Holy Communion. We call, but they do not answer, we are in sorrow, but they come not as in other days to wipe away our tears. We recall vividly the parting scene, the last farewell, the gaze into eternity, the last look down into the grave in which we threw our flowers, and only two things are certain to us, one is, that it is only the casket, and not the precious jewel, which we had been burying, the body and not the soul, and the other was that we had laid it there, in the sure and certain hope of a [5/6] resurrection to eternal life. But where then has the spirit fled and where is now its residence? Oh! that some breath of the Spirit would but dispel the mist from the valley in which we lost sight of them. Oh that some hand would life the curtain behind which they have disappeared, that we might know what has become of them. in the words of the poet, we utter our longings and our yearnings:

"Thou art come from the Spirit land, thou bird, thou art come from the Spirit land,
Thro' the dark pine grove let thy voice be heard, and tell of the shadowy land,

We know that the bowers are green and fair, in the light of that summer shore,
And we know that the friends we have lost are there, they are there, and they weep no more.

But tell us, thou bird of the solemn strain, can those who have loved, forget?

We call and they answer not again, Oh say, do they love us yet?

We call them far thro' the silent night, but they speak not from vale or hill?

We know O bird, that their land is bright, but, Oh, do they love us still?"

["Coals from the Altar," by the Rev. J. Cross.]

Let us, my brethren, for a short time this morning try to see what light God's word throws upon these solemn questions. And in order to see this more clearly, I shall assume that our thoughts on such an occasion as this will set off into two channels of inquiry:

[7] I. Where are those spirits now whose bodies we have laid to rest? What are they doing and what is their present state of being? and

2. What is the nature of our communion with them? This question I shall consider especially in connection with another, viz.: What is the use of our prayers for those who sleep, and how can those prayers aid the departed?

Now as regards our first question, you will feel with me that our enquiry is enveloped in mystery. What is taking place to-day, what is taking place on each sad day on which a spirit wends its flight to Him Who gave it, is not, in so many words, definitely revealed.

But what I desire to do this morning is to show you what our Holy Church teaches on this great subject.

I mean, what light is thrown on that place beyond the grave to which the souls of the Saints have departed, and to which, one day, the souls of each one of us must depart likewise?

Now the Church's doctrine concerning this Intermediate State, as it is called, to which the [7/8] souls of those who die, go, may be very briefly summed up thus: "That Almighty God has appointed in the next world a *third* place which is neither Heaven nor Hell, but a middle place, as it is called, in which certain souls, are for a while detained." In this Intermediate State, the departed are in possession of consciousness, memory, and sensibility to pain and pleasure, and therefore it must follow as a logical sequence that in this intermediate state there is a progressive purification of the soul continuing after death. For, if this is not so, then we must conclude either that absolute holiness is not a necessity for admission to Heaven, which, is contrary to Scripture, or else that each person when he dies is at once fitted either for the Presence of God or the abode of the lost. I am fully aware that certain texts are quoted in support of this latter view, such as "Where the tree falleth, there shall it be." But a careful study of these texts will prove conclusively that they have no bearing whatever on the condition of the departed. On the other hand you must feel at once, that a large proportion of human beings who pass away from us, while we may charitably hope that they are not destined for eternal punishment,

are certainly not fit for admission to that place into which there [7/8] shall not enter anything that is defiled. When we consider the carelessness of most men--their want of rigid self examination, and blindness to their own faults--do we not feel how the best of us may commit sins, not indeed mortal sins, but such for which we shall have to "give account"--as for example "idle words," for which we feel so little compunction, and so seldom seek God's forgiveness.

Our position therefore is this. Although we dare not hope, concerning many souls, that the moment of their passage out of this world they are so free from all spot or a stain of sin, as to be ready to pass immediately into the presence of that Being Who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, there to dwell with Him at once and for ever, yet we do feel confident that they have departed in the grace and favour of God, and that their everlasting lot therefore will not be cast among liars and blasphemers and idolators in the lake of fire, there to be tormented for ever and ever. But inasmuch as God is just, as well as merciful, therefore we believe that the mercy and justice of God in His dealings with their souls, are reconciled by their being detained for a certain time in a middle place, there to be punished, and purified, and dealt with, according to His good pleasure, until He sees fit to [9/10] admit them to the enjoyment of the Beatific Vision which is life and bliss everlasting.

I will now quote you one or two texts out of very many which bear upon this important subject.

1st. I would ask if there be only *two* places or states of souls in the invisible world, how are we to understand those words of S. Peter wherein he tells us that our Lord, after His crucifixion, went in the spirit and preached to those spirits that were in prison, who had been sometime disobedient when they waited for the patience of God in the days of Noah? *Where was this prison?* It could not have been *Heaven*--for the name necessarily implies a certain idea of punishment. It could not have been the place of eternal punishment which we call *Gehenna*. For why should Christ preach to persons already condemned, and condemned for ever and ever? What then was this "Prison" in which souls were being then detained who had left this world of ours so many hundreds of years before, and yet were neither in heaven nor in the place of everlasting punishment? Those who accept the doctrine of an intermediate state, i.e. a place where the departed are resting, happily, if they have died in the faith, and supported by the Sacraments of the Church, but not yet in the enjoyment of that perfect felicity which they shall enjoy by [10/11] and bye, have no difficulty in at once answering this question. The answer is to be found in the reply given by our Lord to the penitent thief, "To day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise." We do *not* believe that our Lord went down into the place of torment, for that place is only reserved for those who have utterly lost God's favour. We do *not* believe that He went *at once* to heaven, because our creed, says He *afterwards went there*, "He descended into hell, the third day He rose again from the dead, *He ascended into heaven*." So that we are reduced at once to the certainty that the souls of the departed, like the soul of our Lord Jesus Christ, rest for a while in Paradise, where they are being fitted and purified for the more glorious abode of heaven hereafter. Again, S.

Paul speaks of every knee bowing at the name of Jesus, not only in heaven and on earth, but also "under the earth," i.e. in the Paradise of departed souls. In his Epistle to the Philippians he writes in full confidence that God Who has *begun* a good work in them, will carry it on from stage to stage till it arrives at perfection--not in the hour of death, but in the day of Jesus Christ, i.e. the day of Judgement. (Phil. i. 6.) This, you see, clearly implies a salutary process between death and the Judgement, which can only be a continuation of cleansing. Once more, our [11/12] Lord Himself, with an unmistakable reference to that interval after death, speaks of a place whence men should not be released "till they had paid the uttermost farthing." And He said also that the sin against the Holy Ghost was one which should not be forgiven either in this world, *or in that which is to come.*

Thus then we are driven to the conclusion that there is some sort of forgiveness in the world to come, and that multitudes do enter that world in a condition which actually needs forgiveness. For granting, if you like, that with his dying breath the penitent has sought and obtained pardon, does he not require time to efface the defilements of sin, and to be so attuned to the harmonies of heaven as that there shall be no jarring or discordant sound?

Yes! the complete remission or removal of all consequences of sin, involve its entire ejection from the soul, and a complete purification.

I might quote you many more texts had I time to do so, but all the texts which could be quoted would only amount to this, the plain teaching of the universal Church, viz.: that after this life there is a state which is neither heaven nor the abode of the lost, that there, those who have died in the faith and fear of Christ, as well as many who have died in ignorance "not knowing [12/13] what they did," await the final judgement they in the meanwhile travelling on towards that glorious abode which shall ultimately be their final resting place. With this agrees that remarkable statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews "that the believers of the old Covenant having obtained a good report through faith, received *not* the promise, God having provided some better things *for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.*" And we have this yet more clearly laid down by our Church in those words which she bids her priests offer over the grave of their departed brother, "That it may please Thee of Thy gracious goodness, shortly to accomplish the number of Thine elect and hasten Thy kingdom, that we *and all those who* have departed this life in the faith and fear of Thy holy Name, may have *our* perfect consummation and bliss both in body and soul in Thine eternal and everlasting kingdom."

And now to all this I think I can hear two objections. First: Is not this bordering very closely on the Romish Doctrine of Purgatory? Secondly, does not this afford a certain amount of encouragement to those who are deferring their repentance?

My Brethren, the Romish Doctrine of Purgatory, against which our 22nd Article protests, is one which has [13/14] so little sympathy from me, that I might throw myself on your confidence and trust, to exonerate me from teaching you anything contrary to the doctrine

of our own Church. But the "*Catholic*" doctrine of an intermediate state, and the "*Romish*" doctrine of Purgatory, though to a certain extent based upon the same foundation, parted company many, many years ago. So long as the Roman Catholic Church kept within Scriptural limits and taught the doctrine of an intermediate state in the words of S. Augustine, S. Gregory, and S. Ambrose, we were at one in our belief, but when later on, she associated this place with gloomy, purgatorial fires, and openly in the market places sold indulgences which should give relief to suffering souls, which horrible traffic was the immediate cause of the Reformation, then it was time that the Catholic Church should enter her protest, and this protest we find recorded in our 22nd Article. But observe, that what that protest is levied at, is not the doctrine of the *Catholic Church*, whether Roman, Anglican, or Eastern, but against the "*Romish*" doctrine, which at the time our Article was written was a distinct form of belief, and one altogether contrary to the mind and spirit of the Church. What our protest is levied at is not against the *Catholic* doctrine of an intermediate state, but a peculiar [14/15] view which was held for a certain object, and which is called by the article "*The Romish doctrine.*"

As regard the 2nd objection, I would just say that the doctrine of an intermediate state need give no *sanction* to any delay in repentance. Any one dying in *wilful* sin, any one dying in *unconfessed* sin, anyone dying in *deliberate rejection* of the means of grace, will find no comfort, no forgiveness, no light nor refreshment in the place whither they go after death.

And so S. John says "There is a sin unto death, I do not say that ye shall pray for *it.*"

Those alone to whom Paradise shall be found salutary, those alone to whom our Lord shall say on their dying bed "To day shalt thou be with Me," are either those who have "departed this life in His faith and fear," and of whom S. Paul could speak as "departing and being with Christ," or those who like the penitent thief had sinned in ignorance, "not knowing what they did," or those who through force of circumstances were thrown into positions where they had no opportunities of learning the truth as it is in Jesus, and were consequently guiltless of deliberate rejection of His offer of mercy. To each of these classes we may safely conclude that Paradise will have its comfort, light, and peace, and over each of these classes we [15/16] may join in those beautiful words of our own Office for the dead, "To rest in Thee, as our hope is, this our brother doth."

And now, dear Brethren, just a few words upon the value of our intercession here below for those who have gone before us. The one doctrine follows so closely on the other, that if the former fall to the ground so must the latter.

You believe in the Communion of Saints, you also believe that those who have fallen asleep in Christ are still members of that communion, and though no longer the object of visible endearment and affection, are yet as fondly loved, and even more so, than when they were on earth. Now if a friend leaves us for a while and asks our prayers, although we know very well that God has predetermined how long that friend has to live, and what sort of death he shall die, yet we do not hesitate to remember him in our prayers. And yet

for those who have only gone a little longer journey, and who are watching over us and are still about us, there are those who shrink from retaining their names in their intercessions. And yet the formularies of our Church distinctly sanction prayers for the faithful departed. Hear what was once in our own beautiful prayer for the Church Militant: "we commend unto Thy mercy all these Thy servants who are departed [16/17] hence from us with the sign of faith, and now rest in the sleep of peace. Grant unto them, O Lord, Thy mercy and everlasting peace, that at the day of the general resurrection we, and all they which be of the mystical Body of Thy Son, may altogether be set on His right hand, and hear His most blessed voice saying "Come unto Me, O ye that be blessed of My Father, and possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

In our present office for the Holy Communion we have a distinct prayer for the departed in these words, "We most humbly beseech Thee to grant that by the merits and death of Thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in His blood, we, and *all Thy whole Church*, may obtain remission of our sins." For surely "The whole Church" includes the departed who are still members of the Church. And again in the Litany, we ask God not to "remember *our* offences, *nor* the offences of our *forefathers*."

Oh! believe me, dear friends, there is a real communion of living and departed Christians through Christ, to Whose Body both alike belong. Nor can we doubt that the blessed who see God, as living members of Christ's Body share His knowledge of the Church Militant on earth, so far as He is pleased to impart [17/18] it to them. Accordingly they take part by their prayers in His great work, and the accomplishment of His judgments on earth. We read that Apostles and Prophets in Paradise rejoiced over the fall of Babylon. Christ declared that the conversion of one single sinner was a feast of joy in Heaven. And the four and twenty elders are said to present the prayers of the saints in golden vials before God.

Yes, dear Brethren, if love be the highest of earthly powers, as who can doubt when we remember that it survives faith and hope, and the Saints are like minded with Christ towards their earthly brethren, it cannot but be that by interceding for us, they should conform to the pattern of their Head, our Great High Priest and Intercessor.

And so also the brotherly love of the living which reaches beyond the grave must take the form of prayer for the departed. We cannot tell of course what special help these prayers may give. We cannot tell the benefit the departed derive from our prayers and Eucharists here below, but, my Brethren, it is *just because we cannot tell*, and it is because God has never told us when our prayers for those we love are to cease, that I say to you, pray on still!

[19] S. Paul himself by precept, and our Lord by example, distinctly sanction such prayers. Onesiphorus, mentioned in the 2nd Epistle to S. Timothy, was clearly no longer in the flesh. S. Paul praises this man for his constant service to him, but does not, as elsewhere, send salutations to him, but only to his family. For him he desires a blessing from the Lord and prays for him that he may find mercy at the day of judgment. The Jews always prayed for their departed friends, and do so at the present day. No one could have

attended Temple or Synagogue without having this truth forced on their attention. Our Lord as we know was a regular worshipper at both these places, and must not only have heard, but must *Himself have joined in those prayers*. And yet we have not one word from Him or His Apostles condemning or discouraging this pious practice. And this is rendered still more certain by seeing what has been the practice of the Church for all ages.

Tertullian speaks of oblations for the dead on their birthdays. He tells us that every woman prayed for the soul of her deceased husband, desiring that he might find rest, refreshment, and a part in the first resurrection. In like manner, he says, the [19/20] husband prayed for the soul of his wife, and offered annual oblations for her. S. Cyprian, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, S. Basil, S. Chrysostom, S. Augustine, all the early Liturgies, and in fact all the writings of the Early Church, and in our own day, Archbishop Ussher, Jeremy Taylor, Bishops Andrewes, Wilson, Barrow, Overall, Wilberforce, Dr. Johnson, and hosts of others, learned and wise as these, speak of prayer for the departed, just as naturally as you or I now speak of prayer for those in the flesh.

Thus, my dear Brethren, have I tried to place before you the two great doctrines to which All Souls' Day especially directs our thoughts. Those of you who have lost any dear friends or relations, whether as you hope "in the faith and fear of Christ," or whether, as you may fear, in an uncertain condition of spiritual safety, will, I am sure be happy in the thought that as members of the Church of England you need never omit their loved names when you kneel down and ask God's blessing upon your families. You will look upon this life in such a very different light when you feel that your loved ones are so near you that they know you are praying for them--and you will look upon death, too, in a very different light, as no longer a cruel separation, because you will know [20/21] and feel that your communion with the departed cannot be interrupted, that they and you are still mutually pleading the same Sacrifice for each other, in the same accents of endearing love as those with which you used to pray for each other in days bygone.

Your home will be brighter when you reflect that their presence is still with you, and that though removed from you for a little while, they are still here--still occupying invisibly their old places, still needing your prayers, still giving you theirs.

Our homes surely will be happier and holier as we think how from their distant shore they watch us in our daily duties, daily cares, daily sorrows and joys, with a love that even death itself cannot quench, as we think how kindly footsteps may sometimes be near us, though more noiseless than fall the snowflakes, and how little faces missed now from our firesides, will one day wait for us at the gates of the golden city.

To you then, dear people, Members of the Guild of All Souls, to you, who believe in the Communion of Saints, to you who have this day gathered round the Body of your Lord, and like faithful Mary have [21/22] left behind you for a time, the cares and business and anxieties of the world to ponder for a while on the unseen glories of Paradise, to you, I would speak one parting word, and I bid you remember that you may with perfect loyalty to your Church, pray for those who have gone before you. And if hitherto you have been

saying with her who "loved much," "They have taken away my husband, my child, my sister, my friend, and oh, I know not where they have laid them," let the echoes of All Souls' Day answer you from henceforth as you pursue your way through what will often seem to you a dark and cheerless world, "They are not here, they are risen, they are taken away from the evil to come. They are speeding their flight towards that home whither their Saviour has gone to prepare them a place. There shalt ye see them, lo, I have told you."