

## **SERMON given to Guild of All Souls, 14 November 2020 at Church of the Resurrection, New York, New York**

### **In the Name ...**

On Sunday, we engaged in the Solemn Act of Remembrance for the War Dead, in the same form used since 1919. We had the Duruflé Requiem, a perennial favourite of many, and the usual ceremonies at the beginning. To-day we gather for the Requiem for departed members of the Guild of All Souls, especially those who have died since last year's Requiem at the Church of the Advent, in Boston. Though these are the most solemn services of the year, I suppose there is still a *bit* of ritual about them.

William Pitt the Younger said in the House of Commons in 1782 of the proposals for a very grand funeral of a public figure: "This is neither a fit time nor a proper subject for the exhibition of a gaudy fancy or the wanton blandishments of theatrical enchantment." I shall endeavour to be guided by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Chatham, as he became upon the death of his father.

Prayer for the dead goes back to the earliest church. We have, extant, in Christian burial places in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire, writings above tombs which ask the survivors to pray for the person buried there. Early on, the tombs of those who were martyred carry a different message, they ask the slain Christian to pray for US. In these inscriptions lies the Christian understanding of the Church.

We have the Church Militant, here on earth, striving, and doing our best to be Christians. This is what most people think of when they think of "the church", unless in fact they are thinking about buildings which is even more common. But we are the smallest part of the Universal Church. Since we are amongst them, and we are the people we see, it is natural to make this mistake. But it is a mistake.

An easy to understand part of the Church is a second part: the Church Triumphant. This is the church which has fought the fight,

finished the race, and won the golden crown of glory, to use St Paul's terminology. These are the Saints. There is a lot of incorrect nonsense today about who the saints are. They are not "us", or all Christians, or all those who have died. We have no way of knowing what has happened to them, and how. It has not been revealed to us by Our Lord, most likely because we did not need to know, and also because knowing everything does not inculcate faith, it forces belief. And so, the church developed a system to recognise those who were now saints: for several hundred years it was fairly informal: the local people in the local church acclaimed someone a saint, and a local cult arose. There were martyrs, of course, who were clearly saints – that had always been the teaching of the church. But after Constantine, there were saints who died in their beds, but whose obvious sanctity had so impressed the church who knew them that over time, they were recognised as saints. Early Christian saints of Britain, for example, are in this category: St Aidan, St Patrick, St Cuthbert, St Oswald, St Chad, Alfred the Great, and so on. All these were regarded as saints, and are so recognised by the Church today. After it became possible for the Universal Church as a whole to discuss these matters and study them, as a result of vastly improved travel and communication, the process inevitably became more centralised and more unified. The Council of Trent in 1570 made this official. There is now an elderly man from the Argentine living in Rome who makes these decisions.

But the saints are those who have reached Heaven, who sit at the marriage feast of the Lamb, who can and do intercede for us, and whose prayers we ask as naturally as we ask those of our friends, relations and other Christians. When I go out in public dressed as a priest (which I admit is a much more unpleasant experience than it was when I was first ordained), people constantly ask me to pray for them. Father Wetherell, once a member of the Guild's Council, gave me the sterling advice always to do so immediately: otherwise I should commit the sin of having promised to, then forgetting. I have done exactly that ever since. After all, they want you to remember them in prayer for a moment, not commit to going into the church and saying the Litany for them! But if people so readily ask me, a sinner just like you trying to make my way in this world as a

Christian, to pray for them, how much more should we ask those who have reached God's Kingdom and bask in his glory and favour, along with Our Lady and all the other saints, to pray for us. And we do. We did on the first of the month and we do every day.

The third part of the Church is our concern to-day. It is the Church Expectant, commonly called Purgatory. That word has, alas, become charged with the sulfurous odour of Dante. I love Dante and re-read the Divine Comedy every five or ten years because it yields so much. But it is literature, not doctrine. There is no church doctrine that dictates that those who are sent to purgatory enter a kind of mini-hell, with all the same staff, personnel and leisure time activities as hell, except that they get out eventually. That is not the case. Purgatory simply means purgation, cleansing, and which among us does not seek that? And which among us would be ready to meet God to-day should we be knocked over by a bus or be bested by the cruel viral scourge which moves among us? Very few I should think, and definitely not I. So the answer is that God's mercy extends beyond life and beyond death and the grave, and he never leaves us or loses interest in his children. Purgatory is where they are made ready and fit to be in heaven with him and the saints, a task at which they, naturally perhaps, failed at in life since it is an almost impossibly high calling. The good news, contrary to the despicable preaching of Messrs Calvin & Knox, is that God is not finished with us after death – his love and his mercy continue.

The souls of the faithful departed in purgatory do not pray for us – they have other concerns and we do not ask them to do so. **WE PRAY FOR THEM** – we can do so and we do. Holy Scripture itself says that it is a holy and salutary thing to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins. And that is the foundation of the Guild of All Souls.

Purgatorial societies as such, and Chantry Masses, have their origin in the plague. Enormous numbers of people were dying, and horrifyingly suddenly. Whole mediaeval villages in England and the Continent disappeared because 80% of their people died and the rest fled because the town could no longer sustain life. Prayer for the dead

became almost an obsession, though a healthy one, as it both availed sacramental comfort and assistance for them in purgatory, but also because it comforted those left alive. Societies like ours promised perpetual prayer for the dead, and Masses offered for their souls. We undertook this in 1873 as part of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism, and we have not stopped, nor, please God, shall we, until the last trump.

Prayer for the dead also recognises a truth that modern man often finds incomprehensible. And that is that what we think of as a hard brick wall between this life and the next (if people even believe there is one), stops all communication from one to another. In the 1920s, after the carnage of the Great War, so many families were bereft that séances and spiritualism became a consuming interest. Could we get messages to our dead? Could they speak to us? Appear to us? Where are they? Public figures like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle were much involved in this, and alas, also those with baser motives.

I'm not holding a séance after this, nor do I generally speaking believe in them, though I certainly have reason to believe in ghosts, but my point here is that it is not a brick wall, it is a thin, gauze curtain. And the distinctions between the parts of the Church, though quite real theologically, are not necessarily experienced as immediate and hard and fast.

Remember Shelley's wonderful lines from *Adonáis*:

*"Shadows fly: life like a dome of many coloured glass stains the white radiance of eternity until death tramples it to fragments. The one remains, the many change and pass; Heaven's light forever shines."*

The many coloured glass, such as that we have around us, is the many coloured, many faceted experience of life that we have here on Earth. We pass from it to purgatory, and having done the best we can manage on Earth, God's love and mercy guards, guides, purifies and cleanses us, preparing us to meet him. God loves all his children, and in order *not* to progress to be prepared to meet him, they must have decided, with full use of their faculties, knowledge and acceptance of Christianity, and understanding exactly what they are

doing, that they do not wish to be with him, but join the Devil in Hell. That is a very high bar to meet, and I am not certain anyone ever does. I am not a Universalist, even though I went to school just a few miles from Walden Pond, but it strikes me that the church's requirements to gain entry to Hell are about as strenuous to meet (if anyone is striving to meet them) as it is to get into a private school in the city or accepted by many of the Upper East Side's better co-op boards.

But Shelley's point about all the stained glass being trampled by death is very illuminating, no pun intended. All that seems so real, so challenging, so difficult, so threatening, is dissolved by death, and then our only interest becomes being prepared to be with God forever. The prayers of our loved ones, relations, and fellow Christians we never even knew, are here vital. And that is what we do. That is who we are. It is not necessary, as Pitt the Younger calls it, to employ the "exhibition of a gaudy fancy" or "wanton blandishments of theatrical enchantment", though I am personally fond of both and I am quite happy to think we are close to being judged guilty of them to-day. What is necessary is Christians still struggling in this life, asking the prayers of those who are saints and have reached heaven, and being prepared now to pray for those who are no longer struggling and striving, but being prepared to meet God. How long does it take? How does it work? Where are they? What are they doing? We have no idea – God has not seen fit to tell us. Dante tried, but it's poetry, not theology – his magnificent creative imagination. We know that God is subject neither to time nor space, so our ways of thinking about purgatory are probably inevitably flawed from the beginning. We cannot know the ineffable. But this process of love exists, and we are told WE CAN HELP. The Guild of All Souls is here to help, whether we know the people on our lists (many of those of the last 25 years or so I do know, either as parishioners or friends), or those dead so long that no one alive could now possibly remember them. We have made a promise to God and to them in love. We shall keep it.

Having been quite serious throughout, let me finish with Sir John Betjeman, as my congregation will tell you I am wont to do.

This poem is called "House of Rest":

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 horse-brass shines, the kettle sings,  
    The cup of China tea  
Is tasted among the cared-for things  
    Ranged round for me to see.

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

Outside the Church at Woodhall Spa  
    The smiling groom and bride,  
And here's his old tobacco jar  
    Dried lavender inside.

I do not like to ask if he  
    Was 'High' or 'Low' or 'Broad'  
Lest such a question seem to be  
    A mockery of Our Lord.

Her full grey eyes look far beyond  
    The little room and me  
To village church and village pond  
    And ample rectory.

She sees her children each in place  
    Eyes downcast as they wait,  
She hears her Harry murmur Grace,  
    Then heaps the porridge plate.

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

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.