

All Souls' Homily

Romans 8:31-39

John 11:17-26

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This week we celebrate the gift of our ancestors in our families and in our faith all those who have loved us, shaped us and have gone before us. We remember, reflect and give thanks, and if our griefs are new we grit our teeth and ask for God's grace to endure.

Apparently it was Benjamin Franklin who said 'in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes' . Somewhat flippant, but a good starter for thinking about our lives and our deaths.

So what about our human lives, on the one hand our life is an unlooked for gift that we unwrap like a parcel in the game pass the parcel as we go through it making fresh discoveries with each layer but on the other hand - we know that we are those, unlike God or the angels, we are those who live a relatively short time, our lives are brief, many are very brief, but we are all also made for loving relationships with God and with each other, and that is where we find ourselves in times of both great joy and deep sorrow.

No one living escapes the pain of loss, which is the counterpart of the loving and joyful relationships we have with each other. Much of our energy is at times focused on being angry about our lost loved ones and then on learning to live well again with our loss, our loneliness and our grief.

For grief does not go away or grow smaller, we just get used to it, we integrate it into our lives, live with the emotional spaces left by our departed loved ones, we may fill the time, but not the empty spaces they leave in our hearts. The rawness of grief may soften – the fact of loss remains, because letting our loved ones go, is part of our lifelong learning.

Grief, strangely, may make us better people, more compassionate and gentle, with each other, knowing that we all share in similar sorrows. We can be there as companions, for each other even if there nothing we can do or say, just sitting with each other, allowing and accepting the pain, offering an arm or a shoulder and a handkerchief.

Grief may also ultimately leave us with a greater appreciation of the life we shared with our loved ones, and the life of our own that we still have left to live. But grief is always like unfinished business liable to catch us up when we least expect it, and there is no real end or final solution to it.

I am the last member of my family of origin, and we were only a small

family to begin with, I am still years later seriously angry with them all and with God, that they all went and left me, but I have eventually got to the stage of mostly being grateful for their presence when they were all still alive and still here, they were great parents on balance, and I still love and miss them, and no matter how irritating he was I love my younger brother, so I am now more grateful for having had them in my life, than I am distressed by having lost them – but sometimes I still miss them a lot, not least, because there is no one left alive now who knew me as a child. Everyone I know expects to meet me as a fully functioning adult and no one now has memories from that time that we could still enjoy sharing.

We live in a world of much suffering and death, both brought home to us particularly in times of war and disease. Even when death is expected it can be a great shock, our national response to the death of Queen Elizabeth demonstrates that, just as it also awakens memories of some of our other bereavements. My mother was born in the same month as the late Queen but died 20 years earlier, but the one instantly reminded me of the other, because of that link.

Imagine the shock and distress of the friends and relations of those who die suddenly in accidents like the 151 who died whilst out celebrating in S Korea last night. Or of those who are randomly murdered on their way home from somewhere.

The unimaginable numbers of the dead in Russia's war with Ukraine, all those people killed deliberately in such a short time and for no good reason, is an enormous tragedy and a great shock. God's great gift of life wasted, disregarded and disrespected.

Then Covid has left many of us struggling with the grief of losing our loved ones, in great numbers and in sometimes dreadful situations, also a great shock, and often with an additional sense of anger or regret that their deaths might have been avoidable, or that we might have been with them, keeping them company at the end, and their funerals might have worked better with more contact possible.

We may well be finding faith and trust difficult, because we are bereft and grieving still, finding really it hard to share St Paul's confidence and hope writing to the Romans 'If God is for us, who is against us?'

Our God he says, 'who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him, also give us everything else?' and that everything else will include comfort, consolation and joy again.

Because -

Our God is the 'God who is with us', the God who knows our suffering and loss from within and joins us in engaging with that mystery of relationship - of love, given, received and shared – and sometimes lost

in death. Where we are in our suffering, God is there also.

In the end though, there is always the hope of new and transformed life, God is not wasteful, God is prodigiously generous, but not wasteful, Paul ends on a triumphant note 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' He says 'Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? '

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

That is the same Jesus Christ who rose from the dead, of whom Paul also said 'If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord' and so we are safe with the Lord.

Jesus himself both reassures and challenges, Martha the sister of Lazarus when he says to her 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. That's the reassurance, this is the Challenge do you believe this?'

As Jesus asks Martha, so he asks us – Do you believe this? This is the faith into which we have been baptised, into the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and it is never more challenging to believe than when we are mourning the death of our own loved ones..... So as we reflect and give thanks, we end with a prayer for the gift of grace so we can continue to believe and trust in these challenging times:

Father, We thank you for giving them to us
to know and to love as companions
in our pilgrimage on earth.

In your boundless compassion
console those who mourn.

Grant us faith and hope that we may see in death
the gate of everlasting life
and continue our lives here on earth in that faith,
though Jesus Christ our Lord,
the Life and the Resurrection of all
who put their trust in him. Amen

Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 11:17-26

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'