

ALL SOULS

Sermon at the Eucharist on All Souls' Day

THIS time of year has become the focus for much fascination with the spirits of the dead. Some years ago at Hallowe'en, I was asked whether a large group of people could use the Cathedral to 'commune with the spirits'. Quite what they had in mind, I never found out, but I don't think it had much to do with the Christian religion.

All Saints' Day (yesterday) and All Souls' Day (today) are the Christian response, antidote, and counter-argument to this pre-occupation with the dead. We do not 'commune with the spirits', or try to 'make contact' with the dead, or indulge in the fanciful activities of spiritualism. But we do remember the dead with gratitude, and we name our departed loved ones to God, and we commend them to his everlasting mercy, and we know that in communion with God we preserve our fellowship with them. And that is the point: that we do not seek some contact or communion with the dead apart from our communion with God. It is in God's memory and God's mercy that all souls are held, it is in his mind that all souls maintain their identity and their existence. Whatever hope for reunion or continued fellowship with our loved ones we may hope for, it is only through our fellowship first and foremost with God himself. That is the Christian way, and it is a powerful way; for what is more powerful to believe that each one of us is held, eternally, in the mind and loving purpose of God?

Christian practice has differed about prayer for the dead, though it is difficult to see, at root, what prayer for the dead is but a remembrance and a commending of our loved ones to his love. Given that most Christians find it a natural and a fitting thing to remember the dead in prayer, it becomes just as natural, just as fitting, to celebrate the Eucharist in their remembrance; for the Eucharist is the supreme act of intercession. In the Prayer Book Office of Holy Communion, 'that by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we pray that 'we and all thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins and all other benefits of his passion'. 'Thy whole Church': that is a phrase which unambiguously goes further than that other Prayer Book phrase about the 'Church militant here in earth'. It is the *whole* Church, Christians here on earth and Christians departed in the Lord, for whom the Eucharist is offered.

So we remember our loved ones in the presence of God, we thank him for them and we commend them to his mercy. We thank God for all who have enriched our lives;

for those who have sustained the life and witness of this Church; for those whose remains lie in this building and in its precincts. We pray too for those whom no one else remembers, but who are still held in the memory and mercy of God. And we pray for ourselves, for we too are among 'all' the 'souls', praying that in God's good time we may come, as the Collect of All Saints' Day expressed it, 'to those unspeakable joys' which he has prepared for those who 'unfeignedly' love him.

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Preached at the Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral on All Souls' Day 2022, based on that preached in 2010.

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