

St James' Church, Weybridge

All Souls Day, 3rd November 2024

Today's Readings

Second Reading 1 Peter 1: 3-9

Christians can be glad, even in times of suffering. The dark days are short in comparison with the hope that lies ahead. One day we shall see the Lord.

Gospel Reading John 6: 37-40

No one can live without food – but life is spiritual not just about a physical existence. Jesus comes to provide bread for the spiritually hungry. He is the giver and the gift. His bread is new life in all its abundance. The bread we feed on; the source of life is through his death. The Eucharist recalls that death, his body given for us, his blood shed for us, and it points us towards the resurrection and the new life to come, which is through him.

HOMILY

'This is indeed the will of my Father that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.' John 6: 40

The start of November in the UK is a time of contrasts and conflicts; a time of change when summer's warmth and winter's chill collide.

If we are blessed there are golden autumn days when we feel the warmth of the Sun, when the raspberries still ripen and a few late flowers bloom. But in an instant, we may feel contrasting weather, with violent winds, thick fog or an icy blast.

Our prayers are surely today with those in Spain impacted by dreadful flooding and such loss of life, reminding us just how

precious life is – and challenging us to do more to try and halt climate change or lessen its impacts.

The biggest lesson the changing seasons can teach us is the nature of impermanence, that things constantly change, evolve and, yes if we look closely, they also renew. The death of a partner, child, parent, family member or close friend can often feel like that, the start of a new, perhaps unexpected and often challenging season of loss and grief. And it can feel different for each one of us. It can be hard to see the new life the seasons speak of when faced with loss.

Today, the feast of All Souls Day, gives us an opportunity to pause and to pray for our departed loved ones, as the faithful have done since the earliest days of Christianity. Indeed, early liturgies and inscriptions on burial chambers such as catacomb walls, demonstrate that throughout Christian history, prayers have been offered for the departed. That thee bereaved have taken time to stop and remember.

Examples include Paul, who is recoded in the New Testament as praying for his departed friend. (*2 Timothy 1:16-18*)

Early Christian writers Tertullian and Cyprian testify to the regular practice of praying for the souls of the departed.

Indeed, Augustine acknowledged the importance of praying for those we see no longer. This is because we believe that Jesus draws heaven and earth together by his self-less death upon the cross, his forgiveness of our failings for eternity and his glorious resurrection to new life.

As we have recently reflected at our Faith Confirmed groups, Jesus transforms the relationship between humanity and God, opening to all the hope of heaven. From the cross our Lord teaches that death is not the end.

While Jesus was dying upon the cross, he is asked by the criminal beside him to be remembered in the Kingdom of Heaven. Our Lord replies, *'Today you will be with me in paradise.'* (Luke 23:42, 43)

In the face of great suffering, our Lord offers the bright hope of immortality, to someone found judged by the world. In this time of great challenge around the world with the ever more serious impacts of climate change, political uncertainty, national debt and wars and the rumours of wars, we can take comfort in the promises of Jesus – that death and darkness are overcome with the bright light of new life - heaven.

This is the greatest transition in all creation, the overcoming of death by life eternal, meaning that death is no longer the end of the story, that after winter will come spring – new life! (We will sing about that hope this morning in the great Easter Hymn, *Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son! Endless is the victory, thou ore death has won*).

We can add to the hope of Easter with other words recorded in the Gospel from Jesus, such as *'In my father's house there are many dwelling places.'* And *'I am going to prepare a place for you.'* And *'I will come and take you to myself so that where I am you may be also.'* (John 14: 1-7)

And from today's Gospel reading we have those wonderful words of consolation, *'This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'* (John 6: 40)

In a moment Tom and I will read out the many names written on our All Soul's list, as we are each invited to bring forward a candle which will be lit in remembrance, praying that all those whom we love but see no longer may be resting in the heavenly kingdom, numbered among the saints.

The purple hanging at our altar and vestments, remind us that repentance and renewal, along with forgiveness, are essential for life, which is so full of transitions and change. Wherever you are in your personal journey of loss and grief, I pray that today may mark the start of a new season of hope and light for you. So today, we also pray for each other, that in our grief and loneliness, which can feel so individual and isolating, we may know the comfort of the community of the faithful and the power of Jesus to heal, forgive and renew our lives too.

You see the purpose of the family of faith, the Church, is to support and uphold one another – you are dearly loved and welcome today, and always. That's what we are about here in Weybridge Town Centre – to be a family.

The seasons change and we are heading into the dark of winter. The loss of a loved one, and the yearly remembrance of those whom we love but see no longer mirrors creation's move into winter. But we also have hope, for we believe that Jesus died for us, and offers us forgiveness and the new life of the Kingdom, the hope of heaven.

This is the unique hope of the Christian Faith. Death is not the end, for there is new life in all its glory and majesty won for us by Jesus. And be in no doubt, that the Lord of life and love knows the journey that our loved ones have travelled, and he knows the place which he has prepared for all who trust in him.

He knows each one of us also and longs for us to seek a new season, a new relationship with him, the one from whom all good things come, even life eternal. Amen.

Father Damian Stewart Harrison-Miles, November 2024.