

Sermon All Souls Requiem 2021

On a night such as this, it is worth asking of ourselves the question, what exactly do we think we're doing in this particular act of worship? What is *this* all about? What is this requiem, our prayers for the dear departed, the black vestments, the solemn tone, the catafalque set up before us? What are they all *for*? It is worth asking the question because what we do tonight is so out of step with not only the culture about us, but even with so much of the church. But what we do tonight reflects the deepest of authentic Christian instincts, and the most profound of Christian truths.

Some approaches might suggest we are in fact celebrating the dead. Most funerals, or at least secular funerals, of course take this line: the funeral as a 'celebration of a life'. But this really is nothing more than a luxury of the wealthy. For most of the world's population who continue to live in poverty, in hardship, with shorter life spans, it is a *final injustice* to reduce their deaths to a 'celebration of life'. And while celebration is certainly *part* of what we are doing, that is because *every* act Christian worship is a celebration, every liturgy a celebration of *God's* saving, redeeming work. Tonight, we are not celebrating the dead. Rather we celebrate Christ's victory over death.

In some places where a commemoration for All Souls is offered, we might also hear terms such as 'remembering' the dead. And while remembrance, again, certainly is part of what we are doing here, for catholic Christians this approach, again, falls short. It is not enough. Ultimately, our memories though the passage of time, will fail. And it is God alone remembers.

So, what are we doing tonight? What is this all about? Firstly, and most simply and most essentially, we pray. We pray for the faithful departed as an act of Christian charity. It is perhaps the most important prayer a Christian can ever offer because we pray for those who can no longer pray for themselves. It is natural for Christians to pray for one another. It is an important part of our faith. We believe that for those who have died, life is changed not ended, and so it is natural that we should pray for our departed loved ones as much as we pray for the living. When we pray for the departed, we are expressing our belief that we are all one family in Christ, living and departed. In our prayer for the dead, we give simple expression to our belief in the resurrection and that we are all alive in Christ.

Now, death and funerals as a ‘celebration of life’ approach depends on a sort of delusion that actually most of us are saints. Most eulogies would have us believe that at least. But honesty would suggest otherwise. After our death, Catholic faith teaches us that there is a time of further journeying and preparation before we can enjoy the fullness of resurrection life. In praying for the dead, we are seeking to support our brothers and sisters on that journey by commending them to God. In this we are not trying to ‘bribe’ God but *to assist* our loved ones with our prayers.

C.S. Lewis wrote beautifully about his practice of praying for the departed: “*Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to Him?*”

The second thing we do in our commemoration tonight, in this requiem for All Souls, is to recall our own mortality, that we too will die. On this point, our faith defiantly resists the cultural pressures about us. We are mortal. And no amount of glossy externals, no amount of materialistic preoccupation, no deadening the experience of life with addiction or busyness or pleasure can alter the inevitable: our days are numbered.

This mass for our souls brings up close and personal matters of *eternal* consequence. It places before us the four eternal truths of heaven, hell, death and judgment. And that is why in today’s liturgy there is set up before us the catafalque, representing an empty coffin. It’s jarring. It’s unsettling. It’s confronting. And so it should be! Why? To remind us that sooner or later, any one of us can be inside that empty coffin.

So, our mass tonight should provoke us that, while there is time left, we should fall upon God’s mercy, apply ourselves to the life of grace, and to live our faith as if it were the most important thing in our lives. And it should move us to humility, to know that when our days are ended, *we too* will need the prayers of our brothers and sisters in the household of faith.

For people of faith, our prayers for the departed, and the remembrance of our own mortality, neither paralyze us with grief nor fill us with terror. Because both bring us to see Christ’s victory over death, and the hope of all Christian people.

✠Rest eternal grant unto them O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them. Amen.