

Sermon Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed 2017

One of the great challenges the church has always engaged in is the degree to which our life together is formed, shaped and influenced by the surrounding culture. The Church Fathers spoke of 'baptising the culture': of taking what was good and true and useful, adapting them, and then employing them for use in the church. However, it was never case of wholesale adoption. Certain customs and practices were judged always inappropriate for Christian use. It's never been a case of 'anything goes'. And this really speaks to the tension that while we are citizens of earth, we too are citizens of heaven. There is a tricky balancing act between maintaining an authentic and distinct Christian identity and engaging with the world around us. At times the distinct and authentic Christian identity can be compromised (or undermined) by the surrounding culture pressing hard against us.

One of the places in which we feel the culture pushing against us hardest is in the way we commemorate the departed. One of the most unhelpful ways this is seen is in the ghoulish and macabre celebrations of Halloween. In its current manifestation – of course once firmly part of our tradition – it now serves only to present our remembrance of the dead as something horrifying, violent or grisly. All this just going to reinforce the idea that dying and the dead are strange and frightening, whereas what we want to really say it is something natural and hopeful.

The other force that pushes hard against authentic Christian commemoration of the departed is sentimentalism. We see it those road-side shrines where fatal car crashes have occurred. We see it in the language of death notices. We see it in music choices for funerals, where the music selected mostly resembles something like Mum or Dads 'top hits'. People now talk about what they want 'played' at their funeral rather than what might be sung. It is really sentimentalism that dominates the way most funerals today are celebrated, and it's a tricky dynamic we priests must navigate in working alongside grieving families. Because of course when faced with the uncertainty that grief brings, we fall back on what is safe and familiar – the sentimental. In the minds of most people now the three reasons why we have a funeral are sentimental ones: to say goodbye to our loved ones; to have some sense of closure; and to celebrate their life. These ideas will be familiar to all of you. These will be the terms most of us think is most appropriate to commemorate our loved ones.

Now, there is absolutely nothing wrong with saying goodbye, seeking closure, celebrating our loved ones. But they do not possess the depth of God's calling for us. And as people of faith I think we want to say that there is something much more powerful that can help us through those tricky times. Of course, it's not our business to be telling an unbelieving population how they should commemorate their dead. We can't impose our understanding – as people of faith - onto those who do not share our faith. But as the culture pushes hard against us on this matter, and on this All Souls day it may be worth reminding ourselves what exactly makes for a *Christian* commemoration. We're not responsible for what happens 'out there'. But we can make sure that as a Christian community we remain true to our identity and calling.

The first aspect of a distinct and authentic Christian commemoration of the departed is Jesus Christ! We are here to worship Jesus! It may seem strange to us, but the *Christian* funeral at least ought to be an act of worship! That what makes tonight's celebration so important. Even as we commemorate the departed, our focus remains firmly on Jesus. When Christ has been displaced from the centre of Christian prayer, we know the pressure the culture has exerted has been too great. When we can longer

discern Christ as the object and subject of our prayer, the compromise has been too great. Even in death, Christ is to remain the very centre of our prayer. By reminding us that Christ is always the centre, we are reminded of hope. This hope is key to understanding the real reasons for the Christian commemoration.

The second essential aspect of our commemorations is to thank God for His unending mercy. It is God's mercy that fills us with hope. Tonight - even as we remember the departed - we remember too *our* need of mercy. And we thank God that he shows this to us graciously and abundantly. You would be familiar that so often after death there is the attempt to canonize the person who has died. We hear all about the great things they did, the good person they were. Of course, this is usually the central platform of most contemporary funerals. But from the perspective of faith this so often misses the point: that in death we are all equal. The emphasis on 'celebrating' a life is problematic in that it can create an inequality in our commemorations. It can mean some people can have a lot said about them others little or nothing said about them. For those whose lives have been marked tragedy, poverty, trauma often - to put it bluntly - there isn't much good to be said. But in death we are equal in the sight of God. We are all sinners. All in need of his mercy.

The third aspect of an authentic Christian commemoration of the departed is that it renews our faith, and in particular our faith in the resurrection. Our faith in the resurrection is what marks us Christian. It is faith in the resurrection which means we can look at death squarely, that we can say with Paul, *death where is your victory, O grave where now is your sting?* For this reason, the Paschal Candle - the Easter Candle - burns before us tonight: to remind us that even us we rejoice in Christ's own resurrection, his life of glory - *his* victory of death and the grave - will be *ours* as well.

The final aspect of an authentic Christian commemoration of the departed is to pray for the departed. In death, as in life, we need each other's prayers. The catholic faith teaches us that our connection to our loved ones does not end in death. And we dare not *presume* to know the state of a soul at death. So, just as we pray for those whom we love in life so - that they may be aided by our prayers - we continue to pray for them, in death.

In our commemoration of the departed, the Christian community can do so, so much more than resort to the macabre or the sentimental. Rather, our focus remains on God, to worship him; to thank God for His mercy and to remember our need for mercy; to renew our faith in the Resurrection; and to pray for the souls of the departed. All these four things are brought to focus in our celebration before us tonight. To pray for each other, and for the dead - as we do tonight - is an act of mercy and kindness. In doing so, we proclaim as a community the central mystery of our faith: our hope of resurrection in the light of the death, resurrection Christ our Lord. Amen.