



ALL SOULS SERVICE – 6 NOVEMBER 2022 – 16:00 – GINGINS

REMEMBERING THOSE WHO HAVE DIED

Good evening, everyone. Let me begin this reflection with a poem by Ann Lewin, who is a British poet and a retreat leader:

The place of remembering:
where, as the work of grief is done,
memory recovers its perspective.

Letting the dead one go,
with aching sense of loss,
opens the way to finding again
a rounded person, gifts and faults,
delights and irritations;
makes it possible to share again
the jokes, the intimate glance,
keep company unseen.

November is a month for remembering, including this evening as we gather together, perhaps with some trepidation or with some sadness, to remember quietly those whom we have loved and who have died whether recently or in years past.

It isn't easy to remember, especially when remembering brings back the pain of our loss. It isn't easy to remember when the relationship we shared had its difficulties, or when we feel that there were things we wanted to say or do but didn't get the chance. Sometimes remembering is the last thing that we want to do or are able to do.

But this evening, we have come together with others who have experienced loss, and together, we remember and honour our loved ones in whatever way feels appropriate for us at this time.

The Christian faith has a strong tradition of remembering. As Jesus approached his own death we are told that he shared a simple meal with his friends. He urged them to remember him every time they would break bread or drink together. He knew that he was going to die but he wanted his friends to know that he would never leave them.

Inviting his friends to remember him every time they ate bread or drank wine is an act of remembrance associated with life and all that lies ahead, not just simply what lies behind us. For many of us there will be times in a day or simple acts that remind us of the person we have lost. For me, sometimes when I make and prepare a Chinese-style meal, I remember my mother standing next to me and giving me advice as she watched me cook. I didn't appreciate the advice at the time, but now I remember with love as I hear her voice in my thoughts as I slice up vegetables and marinade meat to make a favourite family meal. Sometimes the act of remembering will trip us up as we seem to forget what has happened, or at other times the act of remembering is our greatest comfort and strength.

In her poem, Ann Lewin writes of how as we work through our grief, our "memory recovers its perspective." We don't just remember our loved ones as saints but we start to remember the way they got on our nerves or the things that drove us mad – or at least the potential for that to happen. But as we begin to remember the things that made us laugh and the things that made us cross, the things that made us proud and the ways they could embarrass us, it's as though the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle are coming back together again.

When we lose someone dear to us, it's as though a jigsaw puzzle has been thrown up into the air and all the pieces have been scattered far and wide. As we remember, the pieces start to come together, but the picture isn't quite the same. We have to look closely at what is emerging, and there in the new picture is the possibility that we can still love the one we have lost and that the life we did share with them has made a difference to the people we are now.

Ann's poem talks of how "letting the dead one go... opens the way to finding again..." It is a paradox and for some of us it may take many years to reach beyond the "aching sense of loss" but every time we remember we gather some of the fragments together and the new picture starts to get clearer.

This evening, we have come together to commemorate our loved ones by hearing their names read out in the presence of God and his people, and by lighting candles together. But how do such beautiful rituals speak to us, and what is the Christian message that is reflected through them?

We live in an age and culture where death is almost a taboo subject. Once upon a time, bereaved people were encouraged to dress in distinctive black clothing and spend time set apart for mourning. These days we often feel social pressure to 'get back to normal' as soon as possible after a death, but of course, 'normal' will never be quite the same again.

While it is important that we learn to live in a new 'normality,' to find meaning and purpose in our lives without those whom we have lost, it is also important that we are able to openly acknowledge our loss, and to cherish and share our memories with others. In returning to everyday life, some of us may shy away from talking about our bereavement, or we may not wish to speak about other's bereavement. Understandably, we are concerned about upsetting or embarrassing others. And so grief and pain may lie hidden for various reasons.

But here this evening, we are offered a safe space in God's presence where we can freely remember those who are now hidden from us by the shadow of death. We may remember how they looked, how they sounded, remember the many things we shared, and acknowledge the extent to which they continue to be present with us, in our hearts and in our lives. It is an opportunity to give thanks for the chance to love and be loved.

And this service also allows us a time and space in which we can, before God, acknowledge other emotions which may accompany a death, and which we may have tried to ignore or suppress...a sense of pain, anger, bewilderment, or regret. Scripture, especially the Psalms and Lamentations, are full of these emotions, of people crying out to God in protest, anger and hurt, and honestly expressing what was in their hearts, and God's Church remains a place where we can come with our anxieties, feelings, doubts, and questions. We come to God to experience his compassion and his mercies which never come to an end. As the prophet in Lamentations declared: God's mercies are renewed every morning because of God's great faithfulness towards his people.

Memories don't just connect us with the past. Memories are also what connect us with the future, with hope and new life as Jesus promised his followers. As we remember, as the fragments start to come together and we see new possibilities emerging, may we become ever more aware of the bond of love that cannot be broken and, in time, may we become familiar with that place where we can "keep company unseen," even perhaps sharing again the intimate glance of a love that cannot be overcome.