

All Souls 2019 (Commemoration of the Faithful Departed)

Requiem Eucharist, 3 November 2019

A sermon preached by the Dean

At the funeral of those you are here this afternoon to remember, the priest will have spoken, in the prayers and the address, words like 'heaven' and 'eternity' and feeling as you did then, and perhaps still do, I wonder if those words were a comfort or, if, feeling bereft, they rang hollow to you. Feeling perhaps, such an emptiness and finality, words about new life and Christian hope may have been very hard to hear. Perhaps the idea of eternity still is.

If that is the case for you, and even if it isn't, I wonder if I might invite you to take a very brief journey with me?

It starts with taking a different viewpoint, and it's the one which parish clergy and pastors are privileged to hold, and it is never more apparent to us than now, as we stand at the front, as you bring up those white crosses with all the beloved names written on them, as we see your faces, understand perhaps a little of the journey that many of you have taken and upon which some of us have been privileged to accompany you part of the way.

Our viewpoint is one which holds on our hearts the faithfulness with which so many of you accompanied those you are here to remember on their own journey; the visits to hospital, absorbing diagnosis, mediating news, adapting lives to the routine of treatment, medication, visits, keeping family updated, having (or perhaps to your regret *not* having) crucially important conversations; waiting for hours at bedsides, keeping faithful vigil right up to the end. Dealing with conflicting emotions; relief that the suffering is over, and the bleakness of having to learn to live different. Perhaps dealing with different ways of grieving that other family members hold, trying to keep families together, or trying perhaps to get used to the silent house, fill the void that has been left in your day.

You have, so many of you, born the cost of loving; seen through to the end the privilege of being a son or daughter, spouse, parent, brother or sister. You have understood, really understood what it means to cherish and hold another human life.

And it has changed you, both hollowed you out, and also enlarged your heart through grief; exhausted you, and made you realise that at the moment when you felt most drained, perhaps you found reserves you never knew you had.

And if that approximates in a few regards to *your* story, then look through our eyes for a moment and see that story retold, re-framed in so many different stories gathered here now. We look out at faces which have seen so much and lives which have given so much, and we see here such an in-gathering of love and grief and compassion.

And then imagine, if you can, the wider network of your families and friends who may not be here now, but whose lives have been touched with a fragment of your journey and your love and sorrow, and of the stories and memories and images of those you have come here to remember. Their lives have also been thrown off track, less perhaps than yours, but somewhat, nevertheless.

And if you can imagine all of those stories, and all of those networks, and all of that history gathered up into one...well, it's not something you can see, but that does not make it any less real. And while you live, that reality, for that is what I think it is, will live in you, and after you are gone, it will continue to live on in those whose lives you and the ones you are here to remember tonight have touched, and in subtle but absolutely tangible ways, that reality of transforming love and memory will continue, again, not visible, but not a whit less real.

And then imagine, if you will, that this viewpoint with which we frail and fallible mortal clergy are blessed is part of an even wider perspective than yours, than those gathered here, than the complex web of relationships you hold here now. Imagine if there were a place, no, a state of being, where all that history, all that love and journeying and suffering, were gathered up? A place where the un-reconciled suffering you have felt, meets boundless love, the kind of love you have known and experienced, I hope still know and experience. Imagine if our one story, all of our stories here today, all of the stories that have ever been, find their end and fulfilment in a reality which holds all of that together in an inexhaustible endeavour of love; and that however alone you sometimes feel, however hard it may be to get up in the morning, however bleak the day that lies ahead, that reality which is inexhaustible love, surrounds you, waits for you, and through the endeavour and friends, family, total strangers, seeks to hold you together in love.

And if you've been prepared to stay with me, through the reality of the love you have shared, the continuity of the love you have given away, through the network of compassion through to the sense of that network, that reality being infinite and eternal, then that is what we are trying to talk about when we stand before the coffin, at the graveside, faced with the mortality of human lives, yet touched with a rumour of eternity which continues to challenge us to believe and live out that belief in everything we do.

In a few minutes another story will be told; about a man going to his death in fear and grief, who gives his friends a final gift: simple things of bread and wine to symbolise his life poured out for them, for the world, for the universe; the place where unreconciled suffering meets inexhaustible compassion; tokens of love for your journey, simple things which speak of that eternity. Come share the meal, look around you at your fellow travellers, know yourselves loved and held, and know that you share and are held in a place of healing.

*Joe Hawes
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