



All Souls, Year A – November 6, 2011

Wisdom 3.1-9

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

We have all been touched by the sting of death. Death is, in fact, an inescapable part of life. It seems cruel sometimes but it is necessary to the cycle of life; the cycle of life which moves us to fully live in the time that we have because we understand that we are here for a very short time.

Our human nature has lovely safe guards built in regarding how we deal with the loss of those that we love. Whether the death was sudden or expected, whether it happened after a long illness or with no warning, the death of a loved one throws us unto a state of shock, a place, quite frankly, which oddly protects us from the enormity of what is gone from our life. The days immediately following a loved one's passing are often described as a fog, a state of being without bright colours, where objects have no sharp edges and everything is a bit off...a bit blurry. If we are lucky we are surrounded with other people who loved the person as we loved them and we share stories both funny and poignant but sometimes, just sometimes, a memory appears that we would rather forget; those memories of times that we feel guilty or angry or disappointed about. Part of the process of grieving, the part that happens without our knowing, is that we push down those unpleasant memories and concentrate on the good ones, the happy ones, the ones that make us feel better about our relationship with the loved one lost.

On All Souls' Day, then, how do we remember accurately without the distortions sentimentality brings to memory by idealising the dead and romanticising our relations with them? How do we love them in the truth of what they were and what we are? And how does this affect the way we go on living with our memories, our grief, our aching and our hope?

This service of All Souls is the 'work' we living do for the dead. This is not because we believe that God's mercy can only be triggered by our intercession, but because it is our life task to hold in our mind and heart those who are given to us through kindred and affinity, and as friends, colleagues and neighbours. This task transcends the boundaries of life and death. It matters to us that we should know that we shall not be forgotten, that we leave behind some trace of ourselves in the memories and experiences of those with whom we have shared our lives. So it matters that we do what the poet Rilke called Herzwerk, 'heart-work' for the dead whom we remember in love and truth. It matters to the dead. It matters to the living.

We all, each of us, struggle with knowing what exactly happens after death. We each gather images which bring us comfort, images which began with our Sunday School training from years long past, in which we are brought to the heavenly kingdom and are reunited with those whom we have lost. Apparently clergy have been accused for years of skirting around a definitive answer of what heaven is like or where the soul goes when we die. I can only speak for myself when I say it is because I do not know, as I do not know many things, but Jesus did not call us to know, Jesus called us to have faith. Knowing would not require faith and faith is what we are called to again and again in the scriptures.

Believers have been struggling with these issues about what happens after death since the beginning of time. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians states the struggle this way, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

Here's what I do know. I know that in life we each live in God. We are fully known in God. We move in God. We have our being in God. And when we die, we do not die into nothingness; we die into God. It is the faith that our loved ones are now fully incorporated into the splendor and the unknowable-ness of God. We cannot fathom what that looks like, we cannot comprehend exactly what the light means at the end, but even as we cannot know, we have faith that those whom we have loved are now in God, and we have faith that at our end we too will join them. And now, in the present, each of those whom we have lost continues to live on in us, in our memories and in what they taught us; good and bad. We recall their deaths even as we live our lives and this is the cycle of life – one cannot happen without the other.

On this day, at the celebration of All Souls, we honour them and pray for them; the real them, not because our intercessions are necessary but because, because, this is the work that we the living do for the dead. As it says in Wisdom, "those who trust in God will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love." So for all of the Saints and sinners who we remember today and who now abide with that unknowable, unfathomable God, where they, like us, are fully known, thanks be to God.