

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed
(Romans 5:5-11 / John 6:37-40)
02.11.2014

The opening verse of today's first reading sets the tone for this day of remembrance of the Faithful Departed. It speaks of hope and love.

I hear Paul's words inviting us to hold hope in our hearts in regard to those who have gone before us.

Elsewhere we are told that we are not to be as the Pagans are, *without hope in regard to those who have died*.

What Paul writes here in Romans 5 are words addressed to people who are alive, but I believe that these same words can be equally applied to those who have died.

The apostle's exhortation is to be strong and to remain steady in hope. Paul invites us to hope for ourselves, of course, but not only for ourselves, but for all others, and surely this includes our departed brothers and sisters.

I believe the apostle's words can be read as an invitation for us to hope that all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith are now enjoying God's mercy and bathed in His light.

Encouraged by Paul's words, I cannot help but think of a line from Benedict's Rule for Monks. It is that line from the Rule which I often quote from this pulpit. It says simply: *Never ever lose hope in God's mercy*.

This little line from the Rule echoes a central call of the Scriptures in both Old and New Testaments and which is reiterated through the texts we hear on this day of Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed.

Clearly, this day is a day to remember those we have loved and cared for; a day to remember those who have loved and cared for us.

And as we remember them to think of them as now enjoying God's mercy, surrounded by His loving-kindness, caught up in His gracious clemency.

Do the Scriptures not assure us that *God's mercy knows no end*?

Surely this means that God shows His mercy as readily to those who have died and come before Him hoping for clemency as He shows it to those who while still alive ask for His pardon.

Do the Scriptures not assure us that *love is as strong as death* and that *it does not come to an end*? Surely, this means that Love cannot be stopped. The fact that someone has departed from this life does not put them beyond the scope of love. If it does not put them beyond the scope of our love for them, it certainly does not put them beyond the scope of God's love for them.

In the little opening verse of today's first reading, the apostle reminds us that the source of our hope is nothing other than our experience of God's love which has been poured into our hearts by the gift of His Holy Spirit.

Another translation of that opening verse of today's first reading renders the apostle's words this way: *We are able to hold on in hope no matter what happens and know that all is well, for we know how dearly God loves us and we feel this warm love everywhere within us because God has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love*.

At this point let me introduce the message of the gospel passage we listen to today.

This gospel passage makes the point that love always bids welcome. It does not (we could say that it cannot) turn anyone away.

Jesus declares: *All those who come to me I will not cast out.*

Once again recourse to another translation to that with which we are familiar can refresh our grasp of what Jesus is actually saying in this gospel passage. So, let me share with you another rendering of Christ's words: *When those whom the Father has given to me come to me I will never, never reject them, for it is the will of God who sent me that I should not lose even one of all those He has given me, but that I should raise them to eternal life at the Last Day. For it is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life and be raised on the Last Day.*

The impression given, or rather the words spoken clearly say: *not one shall be lost.*

Of course, we know every human life to have been wounded, damaged, disfigured by sin. Because of this none of us is exactly as we should be. No one will ever be able to present themselves before the Lord without blemish. The Scriptures are clear. *All have sinned. All have strayed. All have fallen short of God's grace.*

While understanding this to be true, the reality of our fallen state should not discourage any of us. It should not lead us to doubt that broken humanity (our own and that of those who have gone before us) will ever be rejected.

For God to reject us would be for Him to reject His very self because of His love poured into our hearts. God could never reject His own love.

The woundedness, the blemishes, the scars and disfigurement of our deceased brothers and sisters does not see them excluded.

Indeed, it sees them welcomed and cared for with even greater merciful love.

If Jesus loved sinners here on earth, is it likely that He fails to love them in His place of glory? God does not exclude. It is not in His nature to do so.

To say *God is love* implies that *God is welcome*, for love bids welcome.

I recall Pope Francis preaching on one occasion when he celebrated Eucharist for the deceased cardinals and bishops of the Church one November morning in the year of his election.

This is what he said on that occasion, remarking on the wounds of human sin which marked the dead for whom he prayed.

Let me quote his words: *We must trust that the sin of those for whom we pray will be met with mercy.*

It is not by chance that Jesus wanted to preserve the wounds on His hands to make us feel His mercy

This is our strength and our hope.

This message ties in with another passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans.

This passage is found in Romans 8.

Significantly, it is often read at funeral liturgies.

*Nothing can separate us from the love of God revealed in Christ-Jesus -
neither death nor life,*

neither angels nor demons

neither our fears for today nor our worries for tomorrow

not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Clearly, for Paul, it is God's love which is the most invincible motive for our trust in God's mercy and for our steadfast Christian hope for those who have died.

Thinking back to Pope Francis' words and the Pauline text I have just quoted, a few lines from that beautiful text *The Dream of the Rood* come to mind.

They tie in with Pope Francis' words which invite us to contemplate Jesus' scarred body remarking

how it is still marked by the signs of His passion.

The Dream of the Rood says simply:
May the Lord be a friend to me
He who suffered once for the sins of all
Here on earth on the gallows tree.
He has redeemed us
He has given life to us
And a Home in heaven

Our true home is in heaven.
It is the Jerusalem of High.

A Celtic prayer text comes in with its insight about Jerusalem the Holy City and the entrance thereto:

Saviour and Friend
My Guide to the Eternal Town
The welcome at its gate.

The One who gave His life for God's children is the welcome at the gate of the heavenly Jerusalem. He the Good Shepherd who cares for the lost and those who have strayed. He is Himself the gate (Cf John 10)

He has told us that He will turn no one away.

Those who come hoping in His mercy will not be let down, because *hope does not disappoint.*

What a comfort it gives us if we know that dear loved ones died united to Christ, trusting in Him. We can think of them with sure and certain hope in our hearts for their eternal life.

But, some might ask: what of those who gave no sure sign of hope and trust in Christ?
Have they been cast out?
What is the mind of the Church on their destiny?

This is where that principle that says *what the Church prays is what she believes* comes in.
Lex orandi. Lex credendi.

The Church believes what she prays.

Her official prayer formulates things this way when interceding for the dead: *We pray for those whose faith at their passing from this world is known to alone.*

A gospel passage heard at the liturgy in recent days comes to mind here.

I am led to recall that gospel passage wherein we witness Jesus express His love for Jerusalem, giving voice to His longing to take God's People and hold them, covering their fault as a mother gathers her chicks close to herself to protect and safeguard them under her wings.

Called to hope in God's mercy, let us think of Him comforting even those whose faith was unknown to us when they went before Him.

I like to think that even if the faith of some was uncertain to themselves as they closed their eyes on this world, it became clear as they opened their eyes and saw love's welcome awaiting them at the gate of the Holy City, the Heavenly Jerusalem, where *all are called to find their home.*

Amen!