

All Souls
(Romans 5:5-11 / John 6:37-40)
02.11.2020

Yesterday we celebrated the communion of *All Saints*. We remembered with thanksgiving those who have gone before us who now live their lives to the full *in God*, enjoying what St Paul calls *their true life hidden with Christ in God*. We think of the vast multitude of saints gathered around the *Throne of Grace*, participating in the Lord's own life, basking in the radiant light of His glory which is shining perpetually upon them. We draw consolation from the assurance that all the saints we have known continue to live in solidarity with us. We feel strengthened by the thought that they are holding us in their prayer.

Today we keep the memory of *All Souls*. On this day we remember those who have gone before us, holding in our hearts an equally firm belief that they are also in solidarity with us, because our faith tells us that *all those who are in Christ* are to some degree one with us just as we are one with them, because, as the Apostle claims: *We form one body in the Lord, so that, alive are dead, we are one in Him*.

Just as we rejoice, feeling strengthened and consoled by the thought that those we call *the Saints* are in communion with us – praying with and for us, so we can be confident that those we call *the Holy Souls* feel strengthened and consoled by our prayer offered with and for them. For where they live they know that we one in the spirit of solidarity with them. What I have just called *the spirit of solidarity* is nothing other than *the Holy Spirit of Communion* – the Spirit of *Communion in Love*.

This *Spirit of Communion* is – at least it certainly should be – the hallmark of the Christian Church.

In the same way as yesterday's commemoration was rooted in our understanding of the Church, so today's commemoration is as well. We believe that *ecclesial communion* transcends the barrier of death. The Church on earth sees those we call *the Saints* as her glorified members – her members set free from the worries and cares that once marked their terrestrial existence; while she sees *the Holy Souls* as her still suffering members – by which we mean her members who are still burdened in some way. The *Holy Souls* are brothers and sisters in the faith who are still awaiting the grace of full freedom which is promised to all God's children... a grace in which they hoped during their terrestrial existence, and/ or in which we dare to hope for them (even if they did not hold that explicit hope themselves), knowing that death is not an end, but a passage that introduces the deceased into a new way of living beyond the pale of death.

How many times have we not all said at someone's passing that their death was *a happy release* for them? When we make this statement – or say something similar to the same effect – we make it clear that we actually see and understand death as somehow a freeing experience. We might not have it all worked out in our heads, but somehow, at a certain level of our hearts, we are inhabited and convinced by the basic spiritual intuition that death frees a soul – by which we mean their *whole person*.

Perhaps what gives us this insight more than anything else is our own daily experiences of just how unfree we all are – or certainly how unfree we can sometimes be – as long as walk the face of this earth. Anyone who lives a reflective life and is at all self-aware will know that he or she is not always entirely free within their heart. So many things bind us in one way or another – our worries, our fears, our anxieties, our unhealthy inhibitions, our resentments, the

hurts which have scarred our hearts, our wounded memories... All of these things tend to cripple our lives. Alongside them, there can also be more positive things that can nonetheless detract from – or, at least, limit – our freedom. I am thinking here of our positive yearnings, our longings of all sorts, our affections, our attachments to people we love and care for... and others things of this kind.

When we speak of death as *a happy release* we imply by this declaration that we understand that somehow death frees us. That is a consoling thought, is it not? But, it is not without its challenges too. For, we know, only too well, from experience that freedom is something we often need time to grow into... and we don't always grow into it easily. Growth always involves growing pains of some sort. Entering into freedom can be a slow release process. Just think of the story of God's People. They came into being as the People of God when the Lord saw their plight, heard their cry and stooped down from heaven to deliver them from the bondage in which they were held captive in Egypt. God's servants were freed on the night of the Passover. They were freed at their *passing*, but we know only too well from the story which ensued that it took Israel a full forty years to grow fully into the freedom God intended for them; the freedom He had in fact won for them when He first led them out of Egypt. Put simply, God's People were freed on Passover Night, but they still had to become free within themselves to enjoy that freedom in the light of day. So too it can take time for us to come to the point where we enter into the freedom we have been afforded after we have experienced a release of any kind. It can take us a while to realise that we have been set free; time to acclimatise to our new found liberty; time to adapt to it... time to fully enjoy it.

I find what I have just been saying a helpful way to think of what the Roman Catholic tradition calls purgatory. What the notion of purgatory is saying to us is that those who have gone before us are now *with God*: with God, but still journeying into the realisation of their new found freedom.

While the Orthodox Churches and the Reformed Churches do not speak of the work of purification and liberation taking place in the faithful departed as their *endurance of purgatory*, Orthodox Christians and some Reformed Church traditions nonetheless pray for the dead, asking for them the liberating grace of *eternal rest, everlasting life and unending peace in the Lord*.

It seems to me that what the idea of purgatory has to say to us is that, at a rhythm which is known to God alone, our departed brothers and sisters are being progressively liberated from the burdens they carried with them to the grave... and so, as we think of them, we are filled with a hope for them which we know will not be disappointed! Paul's words heard in today's first reading are so fundamental and so important for us to cling to as we struggle with pain and distress, suffering and hardships... including bereavement, loss and grief: *Hope does not disappoint! Hope is not deceptive!*

Those who have died have been given to hear Christ's words: *Come ye blessed of my Father. Enter into God's rest*. To those who have heard those words befalls nonetheless the necessity to respond to them. Our God never imposes Himself. He never forces anything on anyone. He addresses an invitation to us which we are called to respond to in freedom of heart. Our departed brothers and sisters are called to step forward in freedom to accept the gift on offer. To accept the gift on offer they have to set aside many of the things they carried to the grave – their fears, anxieties, hurts, wounds, uncertainties, doubts... all that hinders them from being fully alive in love. It may take our deceased brothers and sisters time to set down the burdens and wounds they carried for so long during their earthly pilgrimage. There may be need for a time of healing in them to bring them to the point when they can enter into that

place of wholeness which God intends for them and for all of us. It can take some people time to come to the point where enough trust is in their human heart to let fall all that weighs upon them and simply surrender to *God becoming all* in every domain of their person.

The words of today's Gospel are so consoling. They remind us that the Lord does not turn away those who come to Him. If in so many places in the Gospels the Lord encourages us not to turn away those who come to us here on earth in a poor and miserly state, begging for what they need to live, could He ever turn away those who present themselves before Him poor and needy, miserable and disfigured, crying out for release from all that binds them? Certainly not!

Just as the Lord heard His people's cries of distress when they were held captive in Egypt, so He hears the cries of the faithful departed who express their longing for release and the grace of an encounter with His mercy. He also hears our pleading in their behalf. So, let us pray today in solidarity with the *Holy Souls*, asking for them the vision of God's merciful love and the fullness of life they long for. Let us also think of our own mortal being. The fact that one day we too will *pass over* into the Lord's presence and stand before Him asking for mercy and longing for entry into the embrace of His eternal love.

It seems to me that our prayer for the *Holy Souls* after their passing is a way for us to recognise our own need to be freed of all the things that may be binding us here and now in our lives, as much as these same issues may have bound our departed brothers and sisters during their earthly lifetime.

Perhaps there are *little deaths* that we can live already today before our final passage through the gates of our physical death. These pre-empted *little deaths* can free us up to better live in the here and now... and in all our tomorrows. Maybe there is a grace in this respect that we would do well to ask for ourselves today.

Something else that it is so important for us to engage with – fundamental even – in regard to our departed brothers and sisters, our deceased friends and ancestors and all who have marked our lives in the ways they have, is what we call simply *letting go*. This can also take time. We can sometimes struggle long and hard to come to the point where we allow others to go freely from us to their place of rest. That is why it is so important to commemorate a day like today in the way we do. This memorial day invites us to face up to the reality of death. Indeed, we could think of it as obliging us to do so! But, we have to go further still. We have to move beyond obsessing with death and turn our thoughts to eternal life. This can be a challenge for some who have become stuck in death, as it were. So often we spend our time wandering among the graves of the dead when the call addressed to us is to think of our departed loved ones as now *fully alive* in that state which the Sacred Scriptures calls *eternal life... life in the land of the living*.

We can need to hear the Gospel word spoken about the Risen Jesus and apply it to our departed loved ones: *Why look among the dead for one who is alive?*

Perhaps what I am saying in all that could be resumed in this way: praying for the dead is not just about their need, but also – and maybe primarily – about ours! For, let's face it, even if we weren't to pray for others' liberation, the Lord God would still surely free them. No deceased person's freedom depends upon us. Our prayers – while they are *a good and noble thing*, as the Book of Maccabees puts it – are not necessary in themselves for the deceased to be accorded freedom and fullness of life. That being said, our freedom and our coming back to life after a painful loss can be helped greatly by our praying for our departed loved one to be liberated. The real liberation the faithful departed may await is to be freed by us, freed

from our clinging to them – be that in clinging love or out of spite, an unwillingness to let go of past hurt, for example... or a resistance on our behalf to loosen our grip and *let go* a loved one whose physical loss to us we refuse to accept.

If death brings freedom, as we have seen, so too our commemoration of our departed brothers and sisters can bring us to experience a deeper freedom today – an interior surrender, a surrender of our desire to be in control. And how we can like to be in control!

Let us pray that the graces from God the faithful departed stand in need of and the graces we stand in need in their regard may be accorded by the Lord of Life to both them and to us today.

Amen!