

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 12th November 2023

St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is, by common agreement, the oldest of the books of the New Testament. In that letter, written perhaps 15 or 20 years after the death of Jesus, so well within the time of people who knew him, it is very clear that the early Christians are worried about death. It has disturbed and troubled them, and St Paul wants to help them out. 'We want you to be quite certain about those who have died...to make sure that you do not grieve...like the people who have no hope.' Grieving for those that we have lost is right and proper and natural: our sense of loss, of absence, of opportunities closed down and shared times cut short is real and raw and our grief at that is entirely natural. But St Paul tells the Thessalonians that Christian grief is not like that of those who have no hope: it is a different thing entirely, because the Christian does have hope, hope based on Christ's promise (demonstrated by his own resurrection) that death is not the end, that we will rise with him, and remain with him for ever.

Year by year the Church reminds us of this hope in this month of November. Throughout this month, amongst all the other people and things that we pray for, we make it our special care to pray for the dead. We visit their graves and pray there; perhaps we lay flowers there, too, as a sign of our love for them and as a little hint of the beauty of Heaven, God's restored Garden of Eden, that we hope will be their eternal destination. We have masses said for them, and remember them at other Masses. But this is not all, there is charitable work to be done. There are many people who have died without family or friends, or without anyone who would think to pray for them, and in November it is our special care to pray for them, too: those who have no one else to pray for them.

What is the nature of our prayer? Our prayer is that, imperfect and unworthy as our loved ones may have been, they will quickly be found ready to join God and the saints in that perfect place where all is, at last, made new and all is well. St Thomas Aquinas gave this brief explanation of prayer: *'When we call upon God in our prayers, we unveil our mind in his presence'*. So, when I pray for my own family and friends that have gone before me, and as I cast my mind over all those parishioners who we have laid to rest in this last year, I unveil my memories of them in God's presence. I unveil before him all the good that I remember of them, their kindness, their generosity and their goodness. There is no need for me to unveil in his presence their faults and failings, he knows them already and they mean nothing to me now, they are past. But their goodness is important, because my unveiling of that in God's presence helps to make them ready for his unveiled presence. I will also lay before him the trials and sufferings that they may have born – perhaps even some of them attributable to my own careless words or missed opportunities – because in those sufferings or sadnesses some of the work of preparation for Heaven has already been done.

In a culture that finds death troubling, disturbing and hard to cope with, our witness to hope is very important. Our connection with those that have gone before us is more than just a memory of the past: it is an ongoing work of charity for the present and for the future. As the holy souls

cry out the psalmists words, 'for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting' our prayers are instrumental in bringing about that final and definitive reunion.

I have put on the Newsletter a link to the Shrine of Our Lady of Montligeon in France. It is a shrine dedicated to prayer for the dead, founded in the late nineteenth century by a priest who had, himself, experienced tragic family bereavements. The website has lots of resources about prayer for the dead, and many of the Masses that I celebrate in this parish are at the request of the Shrine, for the holy souls enrolled in their fraternity.

Our prayer for the dead is one of the great treasures of the Catholic faith. It is a prayer shot through with hope, as St Paul has reminded us: hope for the people that we love, and hope, too for ourselves. We never feel closer to the ones that have gone before us than when we remember them in God's presence, when we unveil all that they have meant to us before his throne of grace and mercy. St Augustine's mother, St Monica made a final request of her son, as her own death drew near: *"Put this body anywhere. Do not let care about it disturb you. I ask only this: that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be."* In this month of November we celebrate the communion we share with those who have gone before us, and we follow St Monica's advice.