

Sunday 7th November 2021
All Souls' Service

Liverpool Parish Church

Readings: *Death shall have no dominion* (Dylan Thomas)
John 6.37-40

When someone dies we are often quite busy with rituals. There is, of course, a funeral to arrange, and perhaps a reception afterwards to organize. But there are other rituals as well, including registering the death, and perhaps some of you have had to clear out a whole house full of memories – never an easy thing to do. And even when you think you have completed the rituals prescribed by the gas board and closed the account, and stopped the electricity as well and told the bank, even then after a couple of months something else will come through the post which needs sorting out. These, in their way, are all different sorts of ritual. And the rituals are something we can talk about as well. If our friends ask how we are, then perhaps the easiest thing to say is 'Well, I think we've almost sorted out all the paperwork now' or something like that. One of the challenges of the last couple of years has been the absence of ritual in some of our life experiences, and perhaps especially funerals. There are people here today who have organized funerals with a much reduced congregation, and no time afterwards to relax and talk with friends about your memories. The rituals around death and bereavement stopped with the first lockdown, and even as they have returned, it has been in the context of a different narrative.

But rituals are only there to give outward expression to something else. Everything that we do in church is part of a ritual which expresses the underlying Christian faith which we hold. The rituals after a bereavement are the outward expression of what is really going on. Because everything from closing an account with the gas board through to arranging a funeral is about something fundamental having changed. Death changes everything. The

person who has died, we hope and trust, has changed into something glorious in the sight of God. For those of us who are left, death changes us because we have had something ripped away. We have had a friend taken from us. We are alone.

And what rituals can rarely express is how we feel at the dark times, how we feel when we miss someone so much that it hurts. Visiting a grave or some other special place can be a ritual, but it can never really take the place of being with someone, or knowing that they are on the end of the telephone, or just the familiarity of knowing that they have been there most or all of your life. As we heard in the poem by Dylan Thomas, "Though lovers be lost love shall not." Rituals can never express the emptiness which death brings to those who are left behind.

Our Gospel reading today makes the statements of faith and hope of the Christian community. In the reading Jesus says, "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." It is the central hope we are given, that Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection, promises us that death is not the end, and that if one man can overcome death, then he has overcome it for us all. We trust and hope in something beyond this life, although we cannot imagine how that will be. Our attempts to give shape and form to eternal life will often make it sound like an eternal cocktail party in the sky, but this merely takes the place of something we cannot envisage or describe. Underlying these images is hope: that those we love still have an existence, and that we too shall join them when our time in the world is over.

But what this hope does not take away is the empty space which grief leaves. Yes, we may

be able to express that hope in eternal life, but we still grieve, and we still feel hurt, and we still feel loss, and we still feel upset. And perhaps we also feel angry or betrayed or just confused. This service is a way of expressing our grief through words, prayers and sacraments, and also through creating a silence which we all share together. Together we are quiet and we share our loss, and together we find some consolation in knowing that we are not alone.

Later in this service the names of the departed will be read out, and we shall all have the opportunity to light candles in memory of those we have lost. In our prayers throughout this service, let us cling to the hope that death is not the end, but let us also give space to how we feel now, and give name to the awfulness of death which deprives us of our companions and our friends.

Fr Crispin Pailing