

Sunday 3 November 2024

Liverpool Parish Church

All Souls

OT: Lamentations 3.17-26, 31-33

Second Reading: The Bird's Wings by Rumi (1207-1273)

It is hard to keep one's balance. Physically, emotionally: so many powerful forces are at work around us and in us. Sometimes, especially when grieving, it takes everything just to keep going. A balanced person can seem calm and serene. Beneath the surface, they are falling, stumbling, holding it together.

The Islamic mystic and poet Rumi writes beautifully about the experience of grief. It is, he says, a kind of balance: between letting go and holding on. Losing someone close unleashes waves of feelings, often conflicting ones. It is hard to navigate. It is hard to answer the question: How do we grieve well? There is no manual. Every person is unique, just as every life and death is unique. We have to find our own way.

But even if we must find our own way, we do not have to do so alone. There may be others, loved ones, friends, colleagues, who can be there for us. And there are times when we can come together: funerals, memorials, family gatherings. Then the mystery of our own grief can find an echo in laughter, story, song, or just the presence of others who know. Then we can find our balance, just for a while, in all the storm and silence.

All Souls' day is one time when we can bring our grief into a larger light. It is itself a point of balance in the year. It falls near the old festival of Samhain: the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter. It has always been a time of gathering, of storing food; but also of storing up memories and stories, readying the hearth for the long cold nights to come. All Souls' too offers a point of balance, a turning point: between light and dark; storing up and letting go; the activity of the outer world and the resting place of the hibernating heart; between life and death. Neither part of that balance is wrong or evil. It is all part of what it means to be human.

The Christian faith offers hope in the face of death, it is true. It offers hope that nothing and no one God loves will be lost. God is the source of all life. No death defeats God, no limit stops the infinite love which God is. So our Scripture readings express that hope: that God's mercies never come to an end; that, as Jesus says, 'I will lose nothing of all that he has given me, but will raise it up at the last day.'

But the Bible does not paint a rosy picture of death and loss. It registers their pain. In our gospel reading at this morning's service, we heard how Jesus wept for his dead friend, Lazarus. Our first reading today begins: my soul is bereft of peace. Grief, it says, is like affliction. Like homelessness.

Hope and lament: these are constant themes throughout the Bible. The human reality of loss is not varnished over. It is painful, disconcerting. It makes us feel like we are no longer at home. That the world is broken somehow.

Hope is only real if it speaks to that grief, if it has room for lament. For Christians, this is rooted in the reality that our ancestors in faith carried that faith through bitter experiences of exile, when it seemed God had forsaken them. And Jesus - the fullest embodiment of God, the way the truth and the life - he is not spared. He shares our grief and vulnerability. He dies a cruel death at the hands of unjust powers. He cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

We can believe in resurrection only because we go through the way of the cross. We can believe God's love is new every morning, if we sit with the experience of darkness and absence. It is not one or the other. Only in this difficult balance is there wisdom, rather than wish fulfilment.

A hope that denies grief is shallow and dishonest. A grief that sees nothing to hope for has forgotten that grief hurts only because love really does mean so much. We need both.

So Rumi's poem asks us to look at ourselves, as if from the outside. To see ourselves as the bird, 'bravely working' to stay in the air. It takes courage to grieve, never forget that.

Rumi reminds us of the balance we need to learn in grief. Like a hand, opening and closing. If it were always a fist – closed off and hard – it could receive nothing. If it were always open, it could hold on to nothing. In the rhythm of our grief and hope, there will be times we need to hold on to memories and gifts; there will be times we need to let go, to let our loved one be gone, and give them into God's hands.

On this All Souls' day, we are all invited – and, with God's grace, supported - keep to that balance: to the beating heart, to the welcoming hand, to the bird's flight. Grief and hope are our wings, and they will bear us and all our complicated loves. Just as they bear those we have lost into the nearer presence of God.

Hold on to them – not clinging, but treasuring, cherishing, remembering. Hold on in grace, for now they are truly held by God.

Let go of them - not forgetting, but delighting in their newfound freedom, letting them be, letting them soar. Let go in grace for now they journey to God and in God. Let them go to eternity – and we will never lose them.

This is the balance of grief and hope: like the opening and closing of a hand, like the beating of a heart, like the beating of birds' wings. In the ever-changing air, in the pull of gravity: that is the work of grief, the lifeblood of hope. It is what keeps us airborne.

And if, from time to time, we crash to earth, know that God is there too: waiting to catch us, mend our broken wings and lift us once again into the sky.

Fr Steven Shakespeare