



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Requiem Eucharist for the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

readings: [1 Peter 1.3-9](#), [John 6.37-40](#)

5 November 2023

Many years ago my then bishop sidled up to me just before the final Eucharist at that year's clergy conference. He was aware that I was leading the intercessions and quite pointedly and deliberately said to me, "Michael, you will remember won't you, that evangelicals do not pray for the dead." It was very clearly an instruction, and also in a context where any discussion, let alone debate, was possible. And I do take episcopal authority very seriously.

So, should we pray for the dead?

This week I received a call and was asked to take Holy Communion to someone who was dying. I popped my head around our CEO's office and she said, "Off you go." Later on she emailed to say that she was glad I got there on time and that it was a great privilege to journey alongside someone who was dying. She added that after I left she and a colleague felt blessed to work for a Christian organisation.

It was, of course, a great privilege to be alongside that person close to their life's end, and I was glad that I was able to give them the Sacrament and anoint them. But my prayer for that person hasn't stopped because they have now died. How can it? Love does not end with death. But we might usefully pause to consider its value.

Death is the great leveller; it doesn't matter who you are, how rich you are, how strong you are, what power you have. We all die. We are not in control, we can only trust God. It demands a radical trust in God.

The writer of 1 Peter tells us: "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

The first readers of that letter, facing persecution, are being encouraged with a reminder that there is a promise for them based on the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is what God has done, and is doing and will do that matters; not what we do.

Similarly in our Gospel, Jesus tells his followers that it is the Father's will who sent him, that he should lose nothing of all that has been given to him, but raise it up on the last day.

Again, it is the work of God. We are literally at God's mercy.

Of course, we know little of what awaits the dead, what awaits us. Our understanding stems from our understanding of the God made known in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our trust is in a God whose generosity is beyond our comprehension. But we are also conscious of our own shortcomings in living up to that love. Our love of God and neighbour falls short time and time again. And the church has so often amplified that anxiety and taught us to be fearful.

This uncertainty about how God will receive us is reflected in the music of the great requiems.

Tonight we're using Duruflé. It is calm, assured and peaceful. Fauré is even more so.

When we move to Mozart's, it is more majestic but it does have a hint of menace and anxiety.

At the other extreme Verdi and Berlioz go flat out in upping the ante and creating a sense of terror at the judgement to come.

By contrast The Dream of Gerontius takes a more moderate tone. Based on Cardinal Newman's words enhanced by Elgar's music it starts with the dying Gerontius asking the prayers of those around him as he dies. He knows his shortcomings but has a trusting faith. After death his soul adjusts to the strangeness about him and enters into the veiled presence of God, but it knows its need of repose and cleansing before enjoying the fullness of God. There is a recognition that it is what God does that matters and that God can be trusted. Whatever our shortcomings God's love transforms all things.

We are of course out of our depth in musing on these things. But at the heart of it we can have confidence in God who is loving and merciful and who raised Jesus from the dead. And it is in that context that it makes no sense to stop praying for those who have died. By praying for them we make an offering. On the one hand we are not abandoning them. On the other we are not telling God what to do. We are simply entering into the mystery of God's love and offering it to the God in whom we trust. That seems entirely natural and right. And so we do pray for those who have died recently, and for those whose deaths were long ago, putting our trust in God.

Not so long ago the bishop I mentioned earlier died and his ashes were interred in this place. And yes, I did, and will continue, to pray for him.

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