

10 November 2013

November is the month in our Catholic tradition when we remember in a particular way and pray for our deceased loved ones, friends and former parishioners. It isn't a morbid custom; in fact, in our Christian tradition we always speak of death in the context of hope and life, we always speak of death in the context of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, what the Church calls his paschal mystery. In fact, while November is the month dedicated for remembering the dead, we actually pray for them at each Mass. Every time Mass is celebrated whether on a weekday or a Sunday, there is always a reference in the Eucharistic Prayer 'in memory of the faithful departed'. Christians are realists. While we recognize the pain and reality of death (and some of you here might have experienced this recently), we believe in the communion of saints, that those gone before us live with God and continue to pray for us. Their lives and their memory are sacred; we remember and never forget.

Today's readings have the reality of death as their focus and theme. But it is talk of death that points to the promise of life with God. In our sacramental imagination, death is not the final word. The final word is the promise of life; our readings today almost sound a little like Holy Week and Easter. The audience of Jesus is struggling with this concept of the resurrection, of how on earth the dead can rise to new life. This is a deeply human and perplexing question. In a previous parish where I used to celebrate many funerals, I would often see the same funeral directors over and over again. One of them, a Catholic, pulled me aside one day and said, 'Father, I see you celebrate all these funerals. You speak a lot about eternal life, of living forever in heaven with God. But how do you really know? And how do these families really know? And what if they don't really believe?' I simply answered him, 'We do what we believe. But that doesn't mean that all our questions are answered and all our doubts disappear'.

I found it a slightly confronting question. Perhaps there are times in our lives when we are just like that funeral director or the audience of Jesus in the gospel – really struggling with the idea of the resurrection. Even as a child, I really struggled to believe that all these friends and relatives could die and go to heaven thinking to myself that heaven must be an awfully big place! And yet if it were not for our faith, then death has no

meaning at all. We simply come to the end of our lives and that's it, a bit like a train being shunted into storage.

At the end of our lives, the Church takes us back to the beginning. In the sacrament of Baptism, we are plunged into the paschal mystery of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. In Baptism, we receive the gift of faith and the promise of eternal life. In Baptism, we die with Christ in order to be raised up with him. The Church talks so much about death but not in a morbid way; from death we move to life. It's a bit like the paschal candle that is used for funerals. We gather because of the reality and the sadness of death but the flame of the paschal candle burns gently, brightly and powerfully to remind us that Jesus is in our midst, Jesus is the light that will never know darkness again.

The ritual celebrations of the Church carry us along in our faith when deep within us we are asking complex human questions about the meaning and purpose of life, who we are, who is God and what is our final destiny. Sunday after Sunday, this faithful community gathers in prayer, gathers to be nourished by the word of God, gathers to celebrate, gathers to be fed by the gift of the Eucharist, the risen Jesus present in our midst reminding us of the joy of Easter Sunday – the God who calls us out of darkness and into his own wonderful light.