

All Souls' 2018

Lamentations 3.17-26,31-33; John 6.37-40

We gather tonight, on this solemn day in the church's year to remember and give thanks for those we have loved who have moved on from our world to the life beyond death; parents, children, partners, family members and friends. We acknowledge and give thanks that although we can no longer see them, they live on in the love which connects us so deeply, the love which helped shape us and make us who we are. Appropriately, this season of remembrance begins as the nights draw in and the days shorten. For those who are hearing for the first time their loved one's name in the list we will be reading aloud, it can be particularly hard, while the wounds of bereavement are still raw, and equally for others, years after the death of a loved one, the pain is still acute and the scars come to the surface. For some simply being here tonight demands effort and courage.

In some countries, this day is marked by family picnics beside graves adorned with candles and flowers. In our culture, there is often still a widespread discomfort and unease around bereavement. Tonight the church offers a safe space in which to come together and sit with our grief and loss, to pray, reflect and weep and to read the names of our dearly departed as we hold them still, and always in our hearts. I very much hope that that both this building and this service can be a place of sanctuary for those who feel their grief most keenly.

I hope very much that the beauty of Faure's requiem, his mass for the dead, which the composer himself described as "dominated by beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest" will provide some balm for the hearts that hurt. I hope too, you will find comfort in the sharing of communion, that holy meal in which we will share not just with one another but with those who have gone ahead of us, those we have come to remember, and the whole company of heaven across time and space.

For as we remember, so we give thanks, for the lives that so enriched our lives, for the love we shared, the good times we enjoyed, the hurdles we overcame, for the special moments and the precious ordinary days spent in their company. We give thanks for the power of memory and for the places, music, films, books, stories and activities that were special to and remind us of those we love but see no longer. But we acknowledge also, the painful and exhausting journey of bereavement, of recalibrating our lives as we try to discern, with heavy and often broken hearts, who we are and how to keep going, how to continue to be, without our loved ones, when it feels as if our entire world has spun off its axis. It's a long, non-linear process.

Max Porter powerfully captures the beginning of this journey in his original and tightly-written novella, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. It's a striking, surreal and moving tale of a year in the life of a father and his two boys following the sudden death of his wife. Porter's language is tight and evocative. The story is told in three voices, that of the father, the boys and their unexpected visitor. This is how the father's story begins:

Four or five days after she died, I sat alone in the living room wondering what to do. Shuffling around, waiting for shock to give way, waiting for any kind of structured feeling to emerge from the organisational fakery of my days. I felt hung-empty. The children were asleep. I drank. I smoked roll-ups out of the window. I felt that perhaps the main result of her being gone would be that I would permanently become this organiser, this list-making trader in clichés of gratitude, machine-like architect of routines for small children with no Mum. Grief felt fourth-dimensional, abstract, faintly familiar. I was cold.

The friends and family who had been hanging around being kind had gone home to their own lives. When the children went to bed the flat had no meaning, nothing moved.

The doorbell rang and I braced myself for more kindness. Another lasagne, some books, a cuddle, some little potted ready-meals for the boys. Of course, I was becoming expert in the behaviour of orbiting grievers. Being at the epicentre grants a curiously anthropological awareness of everybody else; the overwhelmeds, the affectedly lackadaisicals, the nothing so fars, the overstayers, the new best friends of hers, of mine, of the boys. The people I still have no effing idea who they were. I felt like Earth in that extraordinary picture of the planet surrounded by a thick belt of space junk. I felt it would be years before the knotted-string dream of other people's performances of woe for my dead wife would thin enough for me to see any black space again, and of course – needless to say – thoughts of this kind made me feel guilty.¹

As the telling of this story moves seamlessly into the realms of fable, we learn that the caller at the door is not an orbiting griever, but rather, absurdly, a giant crow who has come to stay with and accompany them on that journey of recalibration, an avian companion - antagonist, trickster, healer and babysitter who declares, with what struck me as echoes of Nanny McPhee, *I won't leave until you don't need me any more.*

As we seek to recalibrate, to navigate the journey we least wanted to take, our hope lies in the God who is love, our cornerstone and North Star, the one in whom we live and move and mourn and have our being. We recognise the one who does not willingly afflict or grieve us and who is with us in the midst of our distress; the One who cares for us with a love beyond our imagining. And we recognise too, our eternal home, the One into whose care and everlasting arms we have committed our loved ones.

Tonight, in this requiem eucharist, we recognise and give thanks for the height and breadth and depth of that love made known to us in Christ and his gift of eternal life. We remember that eternity began before any of us were created and we trust in God's promise that in and through Christ, we too will one day enter into the life beyond death, where we will be together with God and those we remember tonight, where death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. We give thanks for that it is from God that we come and to God we will return.

In completing his final book, *The Gift of Peace*, writing on the 1st November 1996, just two weeks before he died of pancreatic cancer, the American Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Bernardin reflected:

Many people have asked me to tell them about heaven and the afterlife. I sometimes smile at the request because I do not know any more than they do. Yet, when one young man asked if I looked forward to being united with God and all those who have gone before me, I made a connection to something I said earlier in this book. The first time I travelled with my mother and sister to my parents' homeland of Tonadico di Primiero, in northern Italy, I felt as if I had been there before. After years of looking through my mother's photo albums, I knew the mountains, the land, the houses, the people. As soon as we entered the valley, I said, "My God, I know this place. I am home." Somehow I think crossing from this life into life eternal will be similar. I will be home.²

And so, as you hold those you have come to remember in your hearts and minds, I close with a poem by Jan Richardson:

¹ Porter, Max. *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (pp. 4-5). Faber & Faber. Kindle Edition.

² <https://www.npr.org/programs/death/readings/spiritual/bernadin.html?t=1541091372138>

For those
who walked with us,
this is a prayer.

For those
who have gone ahead,
this is a blessing.

For those
who touched and tended us,
who lingered with us
while they lived,
this is a thanksgiving.

For those
who journey still with us
in the shadows of awareness,
in the crevices of memory,
in the landscape of our dreams,
this is a benediction.

Amen.

Lindsay Meader