

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

Hugh Valentine

All Souls' Day / 3 November 2016



Just pray - gladly

Our heads are often crowded places. Our hearts, too. We spend maybe more time than we should in remembering (and often re-working) the past and just as much in anticipating the future. We can easily end up being only part-time in the present.

You know this, of course, but these two habitual practices can be costly. The remembering can be purposeful and good – though not always; and our anticipation of the future likewise can make creative use of the imagination - yet also play host to fearful expectations.

All Souls' Day engages with both these practices of remembering and anticipating. It is the day when the Church remembers and prays for the 'faithful departed'; and so we look back and remember those whom we knew and who live here no more. And consciously or otherwise we consider the future, *our future*, and who we might be and where we might be after death.

We are soon to hear read out aloud the names of some of those being remembered today: names we have sent in, each name carrying memory and meaning and significance for one or more of us here. And if the names that are important to you did not get sent in, you will, I hope, call them to mind so that they form part of our collective recalling on this day. It is a ritual – and none the worse for that.

Does it achieve anything? That, I think, is a good question though one I have never heard addressed in an All Soul's Day sermon. Christian thinking has been varied on the matter of All Souls' Day and its purpose. At the seriously protestant end it is both forbidden and thought needless to

pray for the dead. At the other end it is not only enjoined but by some held to be an aid to the comfort of those on the other side of death. A hint there of old dogmas about an intermediate purgatorial state where our prayers can be of help.

I am agnostic on these matters, and hope you might be too. Like most prayer, the true efficacy is on those doing the praying. Remembering the dead on a day like this is unlikely to impact *them* but should impact us. Remembering someone who made a positive impact on our life is an act of affirmative gratitude, and gratitude is a generally undervalued tonic and charge for the soul and the mind and the body.

Remembering someone who's impact was not unambiguously positive and may even have been negative or harmful also has its value, if we allow the remembering to realign our relationship to that person. We may not move fully or immediately to a position of reconciled forgiveness but may make a small step in that direction. Again, the principal benefit is not on the remembered, but the remember-er, the pray-er.

Today is known as The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. That has a cosy ring to it, but what of the *unfaithful* departed? They need remembering too. Most of us are all unfaithful at times.

All Souls' has also been known as Defuncts' Day. Would you believe it? It brings to mind the Monty Python Dead Parrot sketch. 'Defunct': "no longer existing, living or working correctly". Not working correctly: that surely includes many of us. We'd better pray for the defunct living too.

Be suspicious, by very suspicious, of those who speak with certainty about what lies beyond death. We do not know. The best advice is perhaps to travel hopefully. But what we do know is that we shall die. We are mortal. One of the best ways of truly living in the present is to consider our inevitable death. Get acquainted with the fact of it. Regard it without fear or terror. Whether *our* names are recalled years from now on All Souls' Day is not so important, really; and of no importance at all compared to what we make of our living, in the present tense, in this present moment.

If engaging with the question of our own mortality is something you are ready to do, please see the details on the website of a programme being run here called *Thinking beyond the box*. The box in question is coffin-shaped. There are opportunities to consider our mortality through film, conversation and talks.

In the meantime we pray for those who have gone before, and we thank God and the universe for calling them into being. Wherever they are and whether remembered by name or not, may light perpetual shine upon them.

Hugh Valentine