

St James's Church Piccadilly London W1
 Sermon, All Souls' Day, 31 October 2019
 The Revd Hugh Valentine
 Gospel: John 6.37-40



All Souls'

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. 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 disabling predictions and numerous fears.

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 may consider the future, *our future*, and who we might be, and *where* we might be, after death.

We are soon to hear read aloud the names of some of those being remembered today: names we have sent in, each name precious, carrying memory and meaning 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 too form part of our remembrance before God on this day.

Does this achieve anything?

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 practice, which nourishes the soul and the mind and the body. Gratitude is always a form of worship, a giving thanks. We are expanded by it.

Remembering someone whose impact was not perhaps so positive, or about whom we have continuing conflicted unresolved feelings, also has its value, if we allow the remembering to help realign our relationship to that person.

We may not move fully or immediately to a position of reconciled forgiveness but it can help us 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 comforting ring to it, but what of the *unfaithful departed*? They need remembering too. Most of us are unfaithful at times, in various ways.

All Souls' has also been known – would you believe it? - as *Defuncts' Day*. 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.

There is another reason for praying, really, for ourselves on this day in particular. I am not sure how best to put it. Grief takes various forms, makes unexpected reappearances. There can be a terrible chill when we think of person X, who once existed, and is no longer here. We think of the astonishing complexity and uniqueness of their being; now gone. How is that possible? What can it mean? These are existential questions. Only orchestrated evasions allow us to turn away from them, though they may come after us in other ways. They are best faced.

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, to practice faith, and to give what weight we

can to the reported words of Christ, such as we heard in the Gospel a moment ago.

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. Contemplate it as routinely as you can, so as to do so without fear or terror. Whether our names are recalled years from now on All Souls' Day is not important, and of no importance at all compared to what we make of our living.

In the meantime we pray for those who have gone before, and we should 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. And we should also pray for ourselves and one another. Life is short. Life is a precious mystery. We are valued by God. We should value one another. Tonight we pray for the dead, and we pray, also, for the living.