



St James's  
Church  
Piccadilly

2 November 2021 All Souls Sermon – St James's Piccadilly  
The Revd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease  
**'In the shadows of glory'**

May I speak in the Name of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

Heaven has to be a buffet, with our exceedingly good drink of choice, and without a sense that our form would change by how much or how little we consume. If it isn't this, then I am not going.

This has been my stance for some time and, I confess, it has not changed much with being ordained. Yes, of course the music is indescribably beautiful and, yes, the company quite literally divine. But, for me, there had better be exceptional food, and some *pretty incredible* wine.

I do not mean to make light of what it is a very serious evening of commemoration, with our remembrance embraced by

Fauré's Requiem, but I had to start with heaven, because it is the *unsaid* for many of us.

We read in 1 Peter 1: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! 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".

Whether we believe in it or not, whether we have imagined it in any detail or not, the notion of heaven is predicated on the fact that this time and this world, this space that becomes place because *we*, our bodies, minds and yes, souls, give it meaning, that all this is not the end. All this is *not the end*, because we are standing in shadows of glory.

But why do we have to experience death? Why is it the door through which we all have to pass to see something of this unblemished and unaffected inheritance? I can't give you any answers this or any evening that would sufficiently match our need for clarity. I do not understand why we have had to "suffer various trials", and especially that of living and continuing to live after someone we love has died.

In a period of recent mourning, I felt totally unmoored, set adrift without any sense of solid ground. My inner life of prayer, upon which I depend, felt rather futile and insufficient, and I was overwhelmed. I felt internally scattered and scared that there was nothing beyond what I was feeling at that time. It goes without saying that this is when the prayers, and love and deep generosity of others stepped to bring me back to some semblance of safe harbour. I did not feel that I was standing in the shadows of glory then, and I do not ask you to feel that now.

Instead, what I am asking is that within what we live, *legitimately live* and experience and record in our hearts, and souls, and bodies

when someone has died, within all that, I am asking you to grasp and hold on to the truth that there is yet still something that we cannot see. There is yet still a force that loves us back, even as we crawl through the valley of the shadow of death, even as we pitch up tent and make our home there for a while, there is yet still something to which our hearts are called. Even when, and especially when we stand in the shadows of glory.

Peter tells us in his first letter (1 Peter 1:8):

"Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy". Not quite Peter, not quite. This is a big ask. It is the ask from someone who lived and walked with the historical Jesus and knew that he was the Son of Man *and* the Son of God, the ask of someone who denied him three times and who saw him and sat with him and ate with him after he was raised from the dead. Peter's words resonate with undiluted confidence that this, *this mystery of life eternal and love immortal is real* and it is for us. It is for us to believe in. It is for us to believe in this glorious mystery. It is for us to hold, yes, when we are

on the mountain top but *so much more* when we are in the valleys of mourning and pain. The shadows may endure for a night, but *glorious joy* comes in the morning.

To know that this kind of joy exists, that there is a greater journey with which our souls are intertwined does not erase the sense of loss and trauma death brings. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes following the death of her father:

“Grief is a cruel kind of education. You learn how ungentle mourning can be, how full of anger. You learn how glib condolences can feel. You learn how much grief is about language. Why are my sides so sore and achy? It’s from crying, I’m told. I did not know that we cry with our muscles. The pain is not surprising, but its physicality is: my tongue unbearably bitter, as though I ate a loathed meal, and forgot to clean my teeth; on my chest, a heavy, awful weight; and inside my body, a sensation of eternal dissolving” (Adichie 2021: 5).<sup>1</sup>

In death, we recognise that we are undone and that our hope is

pinned down and mocked. And we feel that. This “sensation of eternal dissolving” of which Adichie writes, I think, brings our earthly, embodied experience of death in parallel with the soul’s reuniting with the central heartbeat of love that is God. We return to the Creator who made us in love and for love, and we are home.

You see, God gives something of her identity to us in our creation and birth. As it was with Jesus, so it is with us. As John writes in the Gospel, we heard this evening (John 6: 39):

“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day”. We are asked to see Jesus, to see Jesus and believe. I think we are asked to see Jesus not just on the cross, but in the garden at dawn, and on the shore of the lake and on the road to Emmaus. Because if we focus just on the cross, we forget that we are children born out of an empty tomb. We forget who we are, but we need to *remember* that we are standing in the shadows of glory. We can rest in the knowledge that we have a “living hope” that cannot die. And to live within that hope means that when someone who we love has died gives us permission to see

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<sup>1</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Notes on Grief* (London: 4th Estate, 2021).

their life as continuing beyond our human sight.

When I am raised, I hope to God that I look like Viola Davis, or Thandiwe Newton, or Halle Berry, or Lashana Lynch, or you know Beyoncé. I hope that I am taller, when I am raised, and that I can reach the high shelves in heaven where the vegan dark chocolate truffles and champagne are kept, and where I don't have to ask someone else to help me get them, as I regularly have to do on earth.

The reality, of course, is that our loved ones are not able to report back as easily as we would wish, to tell us what eternity is *really like*, but I hope that you will feel reassured tonight as we jointly recognise that death is not a barrier to love. Because we love still in death and, beyond what we can see, eternal love whispers back to us a different song.

For my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, a schoolfriend gave me an anthology of meditations by women which, as serious as I was back then, I found added to my intellectual allure and sense of self-casting as a deep and mature thinking. I can't tell you how many times, and at different points in my

life, I have picked up the book and read one of the prayers and reflections, and felt grounded in something greater than my own limited vision. Both the friend who gave me that book and I have, somehow, become priests in the church of England. Clearly God had a plan when she put a bought the book entitled 'Women of Spirit' into both our hands. It was in it I found the poem 'Shadows of glory' by the irrepressible mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic writer, Caryl Houselander whose words resonate through the decades to meet us here in her poem 'Shadows of Glory'.

Though death walks at my heels,  
and welcome,  
this is the beginning,  
not the end of my story.  
I walk among shadows,  
O Liege Lord,  
my love,  
Shadows  
of Your bright glory!<sup>2</sup> (1997: 60)

We must hold on to the truth that in eternity our names are written, and our souls are known. Today we remember those our hearts will never forget. They are transposed, moved from one key to another, their lives transformed,

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy M. Stewart, *Women of Spirit* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1997).

resplendent within a cosmos, parts of which we cannot yet see. In our grief and mourning, we stand in the shadows of glory, but they, those whose names we will read, this evening, they, *they are already there.* **Amen.**