

Thought for the Day

All Saints 1st November 2023

Yesterday on this programme a doctor from the World Health Organisation described what it's like for a hospital in a war. With multiple casualties coming in at the same time, the process of triage effectively means, he said, asking yourself the question '*who can live, when not everyone can live?*'. *Not everyone can live*. The heartbreak of war is captured in that decision, which comes upon a doctor in the light of an emergency room. Violence has visited in the dark without warning. And a howl of rage and pain is unleashed, recognised by any human being who has in an instant lost one they love.

Today, for the more than 2 billion Christians in the world, is the feast of All Saints. The honouring of the ones who have gone before us. And the acknowledgement that we who are living shape the memory of the dead, and that their lives shape our decisions and actions today.

Forget the stained-glass-windowed perfectionism of former centuries. The Christian tradition reminds us that when we gather to pray, we gather as the communion of saints, in the presence not only of the living but of the dead. We gather in the presence of the dead, whose loves, mistakes and encouragements live still in the memories of us who listen to their voice and witness to their lives.

We gather in the presence of the dead; and that means wherever we gather, not just in church or at an appointed time or place. We gather in the presence of the dead in the committee room of the Covid enquiry, in the village after the earthquake, in the tribunal for war crimes, at the concert for the wounded, in the coroner's court.

The presence of the ones who've died shapes the actions of the living. Most often, because we loved them.

In war, the work of the dead can be to demand of the living that they didn't somehow die in vain. Our memorialising them can start to convince us that the way to honour their death is to cause more death.

The communion of saints teach something else. On this feast of All Saints, in thanksgiving for the generations gone before, we gather in remembrance that we human beings are dead for much longer than

we are alive. Our lives are short. Packed full of bravery, foolishness, miscalculations, triumphs. Packed full of life.

The saints are near, just one heart beat away, urging us on by their stories, their words, their actions. Passionate, enquiring, courageous, flawed; the invitation of the saints is clear: they invite us not to learn how to die, but, vitally, how to live.