

05 All Souls

1 Peter 1: 3-9

John 6: 37-40

'In my beginning is my end.' 'In my end is my beginning'. The first and last lines of T.S. Eliot's poem 'East Coker'.

Although questions of life and death form a significant part of what the Christian faith is about they tend not to be addressed all that frequently today. It's long been said that death is the last taboo in secular culture but I'm not sure that the Church is all that good at talking about it either in the 21st century. So, to mark All Souls tide when, technically, we commemorate the souls of all those who have died, not just those who've made a major mark on the world by their life or death but those whose lives, to the outside world, may have seemed comparatively ordinary – although we may know differently, is a good and lovely thing to do.

Having said that death is little talked about in our culture there has actually been rather a lot of discussion in the last few months about the proposed bill to legalise assisted dying for those who are terminally ill but, in a sense, that discussion is yet another way of denying the reality of death and of death as an integral part of life. 'In my beginning is my end.' 'In my end is my beginning'.

The novel 'Mr Ives' Christmas' by Oscar Hijuelo opens as the Mr Ives of the title learns that his seventeen year old son, Robert, is dead. It's a few days before Christmas and Robert has been at a late-afternoon choir practice. As he lingers outside the church talking with a friend, a passing teenager guns him down. Later that evening Ives sits in Roberts' room, trying to imagine death as something transcendent and beautiful, as he had once been taught and now longs to believe.

Suddenly, he feels a painful nostalgia for the kind of afterlife he was brought up to believe in – heaven as a pastoral location in the clouds. A place where people with white robes lived in an eternal state of harmony with God and the Saints. A place of perpetual love and comfort. Over the years he waited for a sign that his son was somewhere like that, somewhere safe and loved by God. The imagery of the clouds and the white robes didn't work for him any longer but he still hoped for a community of love.

Our two readings this morning don't shirk the issue of death – they are about death – but they're also about hope and about God's promise to us – stated, really, quite unequivocally. We may not be that much clearer about the details of what Jesus means when he says 'This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life' or when Peter writes 'God's great mercy has given us a new birth with 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' but the assurance that there is something unimaginably wonderful after our physical life on earth is, I think, there. We are being promised something that is eternal, a continuing link with God through the resurrection of Christ that no-one or nothing can take away and that becomes our hope.

When disasters occur it's often been observed that people's hope is the last thing to die. Three years ago, during some of the worst flooding in Central Europe in living memory, that was observed as it has been this year in the Tsunami, the hurricanes in the Americas and the earthquake in Asia as well as in many other situations – the tenacity with which so many cling on in hope is quite extraordinary.

But what is that hope of and, the question then arises, if that power of hope can be so strong in life can it not, perhaps, reach out beyond death as well? Poets have often tried to express that hope. In an elegy for a friend who had died Tennyson wrote –

*'Thou madest man, he knows not why,
He thinks he was not made to die;
And thou hast made him; thou art just.'*

For a poet, perhaps, that may be a thought – a possibility. But in the living, dying, resurrected and ascended Christ we are offered something more.

In the opening of today's Gospel reading there's a wonderful sense of gentleness and reassurance. Much of what the gospel challenges us to is quite hard and fierce but here we're offered the thought that there is a real purpose to all that – just as death is real – but 'Everything that the Father gives me, Jesus says, will come to me and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me.'

Jesus is in the hands of his Father and we are in his hands. He came down for us and experienced all that he did for us and so he surely won't abandon us at our earthly end. What Jesus says is often a bit obtuse – his followers didn't find it easy to understand and we may not, but here a clear promise and commitment shines through although we cannot know the full details. That gentleness and reassurance is there for those we remember today, for those we know and have particular care for and who are approaching death – either imminently or in the foreseeable future, for those who may feel they have no-one to care about them and indeed for all of us in our own lives and deaths.

And this is gift, pure gift. William Temple, when thinking about that sentence 'Everything that the Father gives me will come to me' reminds us that we shouldn't stress and strain over this – for we are in God's hands. Our coming to Christ is in God's hands and accepting that is the beginning of trust – one sign that we are being drawn to come to Him.

And then that 'coming to Christ' deepens with the promise of eternal life – and the transformation that a much closer contemplation of God will bring about. Temple says 'All that we have to do is look, to contemplate, to open our minds towards Him that He may fill them. And then the result is His achievement. His gift 'I will raise them up on the last day.'

It reminds me of something Rowan Williams said recently about prayer when he compared it to sunbathing. 'When sunbathing' he said 'you simply have to be there where the light can get at you. On the beach it's no use screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You won't get a better tan that way. And the same is true of prayer.' And I think we can extend that to hope and trust.

The whole of our lives, really, is a preparation for death 'In my beginning is my end.' All life draws towards death – that is an unalterable though sometimes implicitly denied fact. We learn when we remember this rather than when we forget that we are mortal. Our death isn't just a medical fact that life has ended – it's the death of the whole person and so it's an event that belongs to the whole of life. We can repress thoughts about our own death and the death of those we care about, we can try to make pacts with God and death, we can live in protest against death or we can take it into account in the way we live and integrate it into our awareness of life.

Apparently, in London before WW1 there were two large shops selling nothing but clothes for people to wear while they were in mourning. They closed down in the 1920's – contemporary society has no time or use for that – undoubtedly influenced by the effects of a war in which there had been so much death. Instead, we turned to the public answer of 'life must go on'. That, of course, is true but it falls far short of acknowledging our humanity and human needs.

Death and mourning have been privatised and largely banished from public life except in the cases of the most prominent people. The disruption to our daily lives if public services are allowed to be interrupted by death are too significant for that to be allowed for long. And yet death and dying and grieving have not gone away. But they have been repressed by a compulsion always to be 'doing' something. The pace of modern life had brought an increasing realisation that we may miss out on doing or experiencing something if we don't keep moving forward – but, in so doing, we may be brushing aside some other, much more real and human experience.

In the Caracalla baths in Rome there's an old mosaic which shows a dying man who, as he falls to the ground, points with his finger to an inscription below. We might expect to see the saying 'memento mori' – remember that you must die, but, instead, it reads 'know yourself'.

When we think of life and death we might add a third word – life, love and death. The love of God that reassures us that those we love will not be abandoned at the point of death because there is an inheritance promised for us that isn't earthly but is in heaven – something that lies beyond the world we know and that cannot be spoilt or destroyed. It would seem that there is joy there, and the joy of the end can overflow into the present – that Christian paradox of 'already but not yet'.

And so, as we keep All Souls tide, may we have confidence in God's gentle promise – for those we remember from this church – written about in the order of service. For all those whose lives still touch us but who have died – either recently or perhaps many years ago – for ourselves when we contemplate the death of those close to us and our own deaths and for the wider community, many of whom live their lives in the belief that there is nothing after death but who, at the point of crisis, may still look for hope.

'In my beginning is my end.' 'In my end is my beginning'.