

31st Sunday (B)

3rd November 2024

‘Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord’

Dt 6: *Shemah Israel ...*

Ps 17: *My God is the rock where I take refuge*

Heb 7: *Christ can never lose His priesthood*

Mk 12: 28–34: *One of the scribes came up to Jesus and put a question to Him ...*

About 10 days ago, there was a news story about a 33-yr-old woman in Los Angeles who’s doing her best to live to 150. She’s designed a ‘longevity optimization’ routine, involving, amongst other things, taking 20 vitamin supplements a day; 1hr/day in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber; and an 8.30pm bedtime! Now, I don’t doubt that her lifestyle is in some senses a ‘healthy’ one — even if on the over-complicated (and expensive!) side — but the question is: does one really *want* to try and live to 150? My grandad who got to within 6 months of his 100th birthday (1900–2000) always used to say that he’d “lived too long” — not because he was depressed or fed up of life, but felt he’d just endured too many changes, living from the reign of Queen Victoria to the brink of the 21st c. To have that biblical “3 score years and ten” (70 yrs), or maybe 100, or maybe less than 70, is a normal life span; earthly life comes to its natural end in God’s plan for

humanity. To ‘live for ever’ in this world (or even just 150yrs) is no great aim or source of peace. St Ambrose, in one of his great sermons on death, has these wise words:

“Certainly, death was no part of nature, but was made a part of it afterwards. God did not ordain death in the beginning of things; but He gave it to us as a remedy when that damnable sin brought toil and tears into human life. These sorrows had to be brought to an end, so that death might bring back what life had thrown away. Deathlessness is no blessing but only a weariness if grace does not transfigure it.”

It has been said, of course, that there is nothing certain in this life other than *death and taxes*. I guess the only way to avoid taxes is to live as Robinson Crusoe on a desert island. But there’s no way to escape death. Each of us has to face that ... Each of us has to consider his/her own death, and the death of loved ones, at some point or another: sometimes with plenty of warning, and sometimes without. I was lucky to have lived all the way through to 55 experiencing only the close deaths of my grandparents — 2 of whom died without my ever knowing them — and

my Mum didn't die until she was very nearly 90, though somewhat suddenly. As a Parish Priest, prior to coming here to Newman House, I often had to celebrate a funeral Mass for someone far younger than my parents, and naturally that would cause me to reflect — and quietly to give thanks. But in that parish family, too, it was a part of my role from time to time to have to comfort those whose loved ones had died *young*, sometimes very young. The hardest year was 2013, when I had the deaths of a 5-yr-old and an 18-yr-old within about 3 months of each other.

Our coping with death, of course, is a central feature of having a Christian faith. As I quoted St Ambrose having said, "*Deathlessness is no blessing but only a weariness if grace does not transfigure it.*" Any and every reflection on human mortality is bound to bring us to the question of God's love, and graciousness, and faithfulness. It is innate, because we are spiritual–bodily creatures and not mere mortals of flesh, that the great question of death will engage our *spirits*: when we think of death, we think of *God*, unless in some way we deliberately block that out.

I believe that the Gospel of Our Lord's death and resurrection is *the only real way* to accommodate, understand, and accept the role that our mortality has in human life. No-one else in all human history has made, or could make, sense of our dying than Jesus Christ our Lord.

It's important to us, then, in the cycle of the Church's year, that in the month of November we have a special regard for the dead, and that we offer even more keenly than usual prayers for their salvation. But first we have, at the top of the month, the glorious feast that we kept on Friday, *All Saints*. This is significant, that before we enter into the more-sombre considerations of November — All Souls' Day; prayer for deceased loved ones; Remembrance Sunday for all the war-dead — we first acknowledge the reality of the triumph of being a saint, the immortal, beatific destiny to which God calls us, which is heaven. Then, and only then, filled with a longing for that abode of peace and beatitude, can we move on to our prayer for those still on the way: our fellow-travellers, both living this life, and those dead to this world.

Regarding the deceased, it's much more than that we simply *remember* them — no, as Christians we are duty bound to *pray for* the faithful departed. It's one of the *spiritual works of mercy* asked of us by Christian tradition: to pray not only for the living, but *also for the dead*. In fact, it's surely a great comfort to us that we *are* still joined in constant relationship of love and service for our loved ones who have died. In this life we give of our love and service to others — and we help them in a particularly committed way when they are sick or dying. This devotion does not suddenly disappear at death. No, we continue to assist them by our prayers and by the offering of Holy Mass. In order to make this possible for you, then, I dedicate November's Masses, on the whole, to the intentions of the *Holy Souls*. This allows you to know that over the course of this month, some 30 Masses or so are offered for your departed loved ones whose names are written in our Chaplaincy's *Book of the Dead*: they are not forgotten spiritually, their eternal destiny is not ignored, but instead they are prayed for, powerfully and effectively.

Their intentions — the forgiveness of their sins, and their being released from purifying, perhaps painful, time in purgatory — is kept before God through the loving mercy of Jesus who died for us sinners. The Mass is the *most powerful possible prayer for the dead*, and whilst we might hold the deceased lovingly in our prayers daily, yet offering the Mass for the Holy Souls in November gives us a special focus.

Why is it that we need to pray for the dead at all? Well, I am sure for myself that I will not be ready for heaven when I come to die. I doubt that any of us could be said to be. We all make compromises in our love for God and our love for neighbour, every day, and let selfishness creep in. At our death, it is very unlikely that we will be waltzing in to heaven already in a state of perfection for the glory of heaven. This is why God's people, as witnessed even in the latter books of the Old Testament (such as *Maccabees*), have prayed for the repose of the souls of the dead. Just as we pray and offer supplications for the living, for their blessing, grace, healing and

forgiveness, so we do for the dead. The *Church suffering* in Purgatory is one with the *Church militant* on earth and with the *Church triumphant* (the saints) in heaven. We are one Church, and are joined in constant prayer for one another. The saints' prayers for us, and our prayer for the relief of our brothers and sisters in Purgatory, is therefore an extension of our communion of prayer as one Body.

Just because we see the glory of heaven as our spiritual destiny, and long for it in this life — and pray for that eternal rest to be upon those who have departed this world — that doesn't belittle or diminish our appreciation of this life. Think of a journey, or, even better, a *pilgrimage*: the journey itself is so important, isn't it? — it isn't irrelevant. It may have its pains and its detours; but it can also be fun, and builds up the bond of friendship, care and love on those journeying together. The *destiny* is the primary consideration, but the getting there together, picking one another up, helping one another along the road, whatever happens, is crucial. So with life: our deep desire for heaven doesn't take away the reality of

this life's significance; if there's no *pilgrimage*, there's no *arriving* at the spiritual destiny! We on earth, and those in purgatory, are 'on the way,' and we need to be pilgrims together, united by prayer to the Lord of life.

So, if you haven't yet done so, do add, with love, today, your deceased ones' names to the *Book of the Dead* by the door (there's no need to write names again who have been recorded in previous yrs) so that they can be included amongst those for whom we offer the November Masses. Then you'll know that these dear people, your beloved family and friends, are spiritually united through the Mass with the unconquerably living, risen, Son of God: in other words, that the medicine of His divine life is applied to their human and immortal lives, that they may rise again and come to spend their eternity in the land of the living.

Loving Lord, bring to those who have died an end to their purification that they may rest in the peace of your love and happiness in heaven.

Saints of God, come to their aid, come to meet them, angels of the Lord — receive their souls, and present them to God the Most High.