

All Souls' Day, November 2

Year C, 2025

Wis 3:1-9

Rom 5:5-11

Ps 23

Jn 6:37-40

Remembering the dead and naming death

Today, as we celebrate All Souls' Day, we pray for the faithful departed, those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, our beloved dead.

We remember them all, especially those whom we knew in this life. They were our parents and grandparents, our spouses, our children, our siblings, aunts and uncles and cousins and friends. We knew them. We loved them. And they knew and loved us. As we remember them, we pray for them that God may show them his mercy and love and grant them his salvation. We pray that they may be at peace, at rest, and that nothing may disturb them.

But beyond the memory of those who have gone before us into the great mystery, into that far distant country, beyond the recollection of those who have preceded us in death, we reflect that one day we, too, shall die. It is neither morbid nor morose to think of our own mortality. Death is the common lot of all who live. All who are, are born; all the born die. This, too, shall be our fate.

But all who die shall rise again. Those who die in Christ shall rise to the resurrection of life. This belief, the resurrection of the dead, is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the Christian faith. Jesus's own resurrection, his coming back to life after his death, is the

foundation of our hope of attaining everlasting life. Jesus's coming back to life after dying is the beginning of our belief in him as messiah-savior-God, and not just for us, but messiah-savior-God of and for the whole world.

All Souls' Day is a day to remember and to pray for the dead. It is a day for us to recall our own mortality. But it is also a day for us to confront death itself, and to call it by its proper name, *death*. When a thing is hard to face, we tend to avoid that thing, and that avoidance can lead us even to refuse to speak its name.

Sometimes that avoidance is due to reverential awe, like with the name of God, YHWH, in the Hebrew scriptures, which we say as Yahweh. But the Israelites would not dare pronounce God's revealed name, and when reading the scriptures aloud, when they came upon the name of God, they would simply say, "hashem," the Name. And so out of reverential awe, they avoided speaking God's name aloud, calling him instead by many other titles and expressions: the Lord, the Most High, the Almighty, the God of gods, and so on. The Old Testament is full of such lofty titles for God.

Other times avoidance is based not on reverential awe, but on something more primal, a deep-rooted fear, as if by refusing to name a thing, we can avoid that thing. Hence, all the expressions and euphemisms we have for death or for those who have died ... deceased, departed, passed away, passed on, lost, expired, and so

on. This is done in every language. We humans have a hard time saying simply but compassionately that so-and-so has *died*. We want to soften the impact of that word.

And, you know, sometimes, that can be a good thing. The euphemisms we use for death are not all bad. Often they are poetic and beautiful ways of approaching the mystery of death and dying, and doing so gently and with reverence. But that's just it, these expressions must allow us to *approach* death, not to *avoid* it. They must ultimately bring us to *face* death, which is a great mystery, rather than *recoil* from it.

Even the scriptures themselves sometimes use indirect language when referring to death and dying. In the Old Testament, there are the expressions "to sleep or rest with one's fathers," "to go the way of all the earth," and "to go the way from which there is no return." In the New Testament, we encounter the expressions, "putting off the body," "the time of departure," and, most frequent, "to fall asleep" or "to be asleep." But for all that, the scriptures do not avoid naming death directly or even confronting death. Here I think most notably of St Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians (15), where he discusses the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of all the dead and calls out death directly: *Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ... But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Confident in Christ's victory over death, Christian poets throughout the centuries have taken on death boldly, naming it and calling it out. Christian poets like the Englishman John Donne, who in one of his holy sonnets, wrote:

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.//
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

The ancient liturgical texts of the Church, based on the scriptures, continue this same line of language, alternately referring to death directly or by some other expression, like being asleep, or departure, but always with the hope of resurrection in mind, the hope of restoration to life, in and through Jesus, who alone brings victory over death and inaugurates the life of the world to come.

In the ancient preface for Masses for the dead, the liturgy reminds us that *"in [Christ Jesus] the hope of blessed resurrection has dawned, that those saddened by the certainty of dying might be consoled by the promise of immortality to come. Indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven."*

Sadness gives way to joy, death to life, mortality to immortality, the fleeting glories of this life to the never-ending wonders of

heaven. As we face death and pray for our dead, we Christians are meant to remember these things, which are ours by the promise and power of Christ our Lord.

It is our bounden and *natural* duty as members of the human race to remember the dead. As Christians it is our solemn and *supernatural* obligation to pray for the dead, and so to perform for them this work of spiritual mercy.

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord.

And let perpetual light shine upon them.

May they rest in peace.

Amen.

May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace.

Amen.