

St Mary Abbots

All Souls

Wisdom 3:1-9; John 6:37-40

Father Christopher

'It is as gentle as I am myself.' Those are words that Gabriel Fauré wrote to a friend about his setting of the Requiem Mass. We may not have known Fauré, and whether he lived up to the gentleness of his Requiem, but how could we disagree with him about his assessment of his own music?

He went on, *'My Requiem expresses not so much the fear of death as the peacefulness of eternal rest, for this is how I see death – as a happy deliverance, an aspiration to higher joys, not a joyless transition to some ominous unknown.'*

This probably reflects what most of us now believe about death. And yet, it is not the *whole* truth.

The point of a requiem mass is to pray for the souls of those who have died, which would not be necessary if we knew precisely what had happened to them.

I do however think we can have quite a good idea that our loved ones must surely have returned to the One who created them, and this is reflected in the readings we have just heard.

'The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.'
'Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.' [That though, from St Peter, to the living, beginning to receive salvation on this side of death.]

And Jesus Himself: *'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.'*

While I believe in my bones that those whom we have loved, but see no longer, are with God, I can't know what heaven *looks* like, or indeed whether we will all end up there.

You might think my job as a priest *is* to know, and to be sure; but no-one has ever known precisely what lies on the other side of death.

And so, we pray for them. And that is important.

We prayed for them while they were alive, and we pray for them now that they are gone: that they are safe; that they are surrounded with God's love; and that we will join them when our time comes.

Our prayers for that, and indeed our confidence in what we pray for, are important. They are important, I believe, for our loved ones themselves and for God. But they are also important for us and for our sense of community with those we mourn with, and with those who have left this life. Because whatever our uncertainty about what life after death *looks* like, one thing we as Christians *are* certain about, is that we remain in community with those who have gone ahead of us to heaven.

And the primary way in which that community manifests itself is in prayer.

When we pray, we do not pray alone, but with the whole community of heaven.

When we sing, *'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts'*, as the choir will do for us shortly, we join our voices with all the angels and saints, including those whom we have loved, but who are now safe with God.

Now, those of you who are more sceptical may point out that we cannot know what the angels sing. What is the language of heaven?

But sing they do, and though we cannot imagine it visually, or the actual sound, life after this one *must* be a life of prayer, and one we can join with.

We may find it very hard to find words for that, particularly when in great grief.

And this is where I think only silence or music can find the right language.

And music does after all depend on silence, doesn't it? How would music work, if it weren't for the rests, for the silence which peppers it, which undergirds it?

And as Fauré's Requiem ends with the In Paradisum, praying with quiet confidence for eternal rest for the dead, rather than the judgment say of Verdi's Libera Me, we pray for peace for both our loved ones, and ourselves. Amen