

St Mary Abbots

Sunday 1st November 2020 at 6.30pm

All Souls Service

John 6, 37-40

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

I hardly need say to you that this has been an anxious year for all of us. Many of our patients at the Royal Marsden are anxious much of the time and it is very much part of my role as Chaplain to encourage and to re-assure whenever and however I can.

A couple of week's ago I had an inspiring encounter with a young man who knew that he did not have long to live. He had some tough questions for me and clearly believed that I was the right professional person to direct them to. The first of these was this: 'What will it be like when I die?' You may think that this is an extraordinary question to ask anyone and you may well be thinking that the honest answer might be 'How should I know?' After all, death like all things in life is highly individual and each of us will meet it in a way that may be appropriate to our personality and circumstances at the time. But I was aware that this young man was seeking re-assurance from me; he wanted me to tell him that it would be OK.. I was able to share with him that I been privileged to sit with many people over the years as they have been dying and while each person is undeniably themselves at that moment I would say that most people seem peaceful. I might go further here and say that it is often my experience that the dying share something of their grace and their peace in

death which is a great gift to those of us who watch with them; a gift that we can then share with those around us.

If he was satisfied by my response he didn't say but all at once came a further question, this one more testing than the first: 'And what will it be like *after* I die?' Rather than responding with an interesting sermon at this point about life with God, I asked him to tell me what he believed. He now shared with me a conversation which he had recently had with his father when they had been remembering with much affection his grandmother and saying how lovely it would be to see her again. He went on to speak of other members of his family from whom he felt separated. Now I was reminded of the story of the feeding of the five thousand from John's gospel chapter six (just before the passage we heard read earlier); the account concludes with Jesus' instructions to the disciples to go among the crowd to collect what remained of the feast. He says these beautiful, if slightly enigmatic words:

'Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost' (John 6, 12)

Of course, I could not tell this young dying man what his experience of life with God would be; not even the greatest saints from across the ages could do that for him. But the sense that he shared that he was connected at this point with his past, his present and his future was more than enough for the time being.. and felt to me to be hopeful and trusting. In his letter to the Romans St Paul writes these words:

'..whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living.'
(Romans 14, 8-9)

'Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost'

If we are looking for re-assurance on this All Souls' Sunday we should look no further than John's gospel. The mood of many of the sayings of Our Lord in this great gospel are wonderfully inclusive. In a very famous passage at the

beginning of chapter 14 he refers to the many rooms in his Father's house. Because it is all too human to want to know what it will be like we have become fixated on that word 'room' which is also variously translated as 'mansions' and 'dwelling places', but I suspect we may be missing the point. The key word here is 'many'; that is to say that there is plenty of room for all; all will be welcome; the precise nature of the accommodation is less clear:

'Do not let your hearts be troubled [do not worry, be re-assured]. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are *many* dwelling places.' (John 14, 1-2)

Precisely the same mood of inclusivity pervades the gospel passage we heard this evening:

'*Everything* that the Father gives me will come to me.. *anyone* who comes to me I will never drive away.. that I should lose *nothing* of all that he has given me' (John 6, 37-9)

There is nothing and no-one that is excluded by this picture of Life with God.

As we remember and pray for those from whom we are separated by death let us rejoice in this sense that we gain from John's gospel that nothing is wasted, that all are included, that God's love is far broader than anything we might be able to imagine. And the breadth of that love encompasses all those we remember and pray for today as well as ourselves and each other.

Thanks be to God

Amen