

## All Souls' 2008

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**M**ost of us call this time of the year “Fall” or “Autumn.” But in some places, primarily agricultural locales, people call it “Harvest.” And there is an air of fruitfulness and completion about this time of year, an atmosphere that the poet Keats described as a time of “mists and mellow fruitfulness.”

Last Sunday, we kept the great feast of All Saints', and commemorated all the holy ones of God, those heroes of the faith who are named in the calendar of the Church, but especially those quiet, humble, perhaps unknown saints who rejoice with us, but on another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, and with whom, in Jesus, we forevermore are one.

This Sunday we keep the English custom of Remembrance Sunday—originally created to remember the War Dead, but which we have expanded to remember all the Faithful Departed. Both of these feasts take place in an atmosphere of mellowness,

fruitfulness, fullness and completion—the harvest of lives well lived.

Human nature is a strange composition, and time is a tender bandage, and the world is a muddle of day-to-day duties, so that eventually our beloved dead become only a name on a polished headstone or a picture on a polished piano. All too soon do people fade away—out of sight, out of mind. That is why the Church, during the month of November, reminds us ever so gently of those we have loved and lost and have all but forgotten. We might say that “November is Remember.”

Not only remember, of course, but assist our beloved dead by our prayers. Jesus assures us that there is the possibility of the forgiveness of sins not only in this life, but in the life to come (Matt 12:32). On this passage, St Gregory the Great comments, “In this sentence it is given to understand that many sins can be remitted in this world, but also many in the world to come” (*Dialogues* IV.39). In 2 Timothy St Paul prays for the soul of his

deceased co-worker Onesiph'orus: “may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that [Last] Day” (1:18). And not only the New Testament. Prayer for the Dead was an important belief of our Jewish forefathers. As we just heard in 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha (12:44), the Jews were convinced that they could help free the dead from their sins by prayer and sacrifice. If the dead cannot be helped in this way, then these words of Scripture would be futile. And Scripture is never futile. In fact for sixteen Christian centuries, before Calvin appeared on the scene (who, by-the-way, thought that only a minuscule remnant of mankind would reach heaven) no one even questioned the idea of the prayers of the living assisting the dead on their heavenward journey.

Further, if we look at the situation under the strong light of logic, there must be many of us who, while not bad enough for the red fires of Hell, are not quite good enough to have the red carpet of heaven rolled out for us, and be immediately ushered into glory. Jesus reminds us that we must “be perfect even as your heavenly

Father is perfect.” And who of us is perfect in this life? Not me! Does it not seem reasonable that there should be an intermediate state, a kind of garden around the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem where souls may be purified before they are admitted through the gates into the presence of the all-pure God. This intermediate state is called Paradise. Anglicans and the Eastern Orthodox are rightly nervous of the Roman Catholic term Purgatory, because it conjures up all sorts of non-Scriptural images drawn from Dante’s Inferno.

But whatever we call it, the intermediate state *is* one of purging or cleansing: all that we bring with us through death that is unfit for heavenly life is “purged and done away” by the love of Almighty God so that we “may be presented pure and without spot before thee” in the words of the Prayer Book (BCP, p. 488).

How often have we experienced the loss of a loved-one with a sense of remorse? Only when the leaves die, and the tree stretches out its gaunt black branches, can you see the nests of summertime.

So too it is with the death of someone we love that unpleasant incidents of the past, like snubs and slights and quarrels and sharp remarks, stand out in the tree of memory. How often have I, as a priest, heard a relative standing by a casket confide with trembling lips, "I wanted her to know how much I loved her, but somehow I never got around to saying it." It is a feeling like rushing to catch a train, and getting there just as the train pulls out, except that the black train of death speeds away into the unreachable hereafter.

But that is precisely why November should be a month of tender consolation to us all. Perhaps you always wanted to give your deceased parents a worthwhile trip, a truly grand vacation. Now, with your prayers, you are able to assist them on their journey to heaven. You can help your beloved dead take the biggest step any human soul ever takes, from the gardens of Paradise to the House of the Father itself, and the heavenly banquet table!

If we have treated our dear ones too coldly, too sharply, too impatiently, when they were alive, and this memory haunts us as

the ghost in armor haunted Hamlet, perhaps we can recall another armored figure: Goliath. When that metallic giant came striding towards David, a young lad of perhaps sixteen, it must have been terrifying. All that David had to defend himself was his slingshot and the power of God. The power of God! It sent the slingshot whirring, and sent the giant falling. David then knelt by the unconscious form and finished off his foe with the giant's own sword.

Years later, a jealous King Saul decided to have David murdered. And as David was fleeing from the king's agents, hungry and without a weapon, he came upon the priest Ahimelech (1Sam 21). For food, the priest gave him the Bread of the Presence. When David asked for a weapon, Ahimelech pointed to a long sword carefully wrapped in silk on the altar. Ahimelech said, "there is no sword here except that one." And David unwrapped the gleaming blade and recognized the sword of Goliath. He took it joyfully in his manly grip and said, "there is no other sword like this."

A big sword. This was David's weapon, and it can be ours as well. The big sword is the cross thrust into the hill of Calvary: The blade as the upright and the hilt as the crosspiece. It is spattered with blood, this sword, this cross of Christ. "There is no other sword like this."

Each time we celebrate the Mass, and especially on this Remembrance Sunday, this harvest-time of "mists and mellow fruitfulness," we renew in a sacred and unbloody way, the sacrifice of Calvary. What was only dimly foreshadowed by the prayers and sacrifice made by Judas Maccabeus on behalf of the dead is now made perfect in Christ.

As we re-present the Immaculate Lamb of God to his Father, the perfect and infinite prayer of our great High Priest, may the souls of the Faithful Departed drink from that fountain of love that flowed from the pierced side of the Savior. May they be refreshed

and satisfied, restored and comforted, and feast forever on Christ,  
the Living Bread.