

All Souls' Day

Church of Saint Mary The Virgin, Times Square

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

November 2, 2021, 12:10 PM Said Mass

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Psalm 130; John 5:24–27

As November begins, and everything around us begins to whisper, and then to shout, to us about “the holidays,” the church asks us instead to pause and think of other things, some serious things that are, paradoxically, joyous as well. On All Saints' Day, we give thanks for those men and women who are now, we believe, in the nearer presence of God, women and men who lived lives that seem to us to be especially holy, heroic, virtuous, beautiful, or inspiring. Though every saint is unique—that is part of the saints' attraction—they all seem to be Christlike, embodiments of the Presence of God, bridges between the hard, rough challenges of everyday life and the unseen, hoped-for peace of life eternal.

A day later, on All Souls' Day, this day, our concerns are similar—we remain focused on the journey that is life and death and life again—but the tenor of the day is different, because we are meant to pray for our own dead, the saints and the sinners known to us, men and women whose faces we knew, whose voices we heard but hear no longer. And because of that knowledge,

that intimacy, this day's work can be difficult. Because the absence of those faces and the silencing of those voices can be hard to comprehend and very painful.

All Souls' Day, of course, can awaken grief, and grief is not a frivolous thing. The writer Joan Didion, recalling the sudden death of her husband, writes, "Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life."¹ A powerful image: Grief has no *distance*. And so it brings death up close. It brings us to the edge of the grave. It is a terrible paradox—we grieve because we love. But the memory of that love does not solve the problem of our grief. Grief can haunt us. It can force us to ask terrible questions—about survival, about our own mortality, about the inevitability of our death, about the purpose of our lives, about love, about hope, about God. On the hard days, beset by the "noonday demon," it tempts us to look around and ask, "Is this all there is?"²

All Souls' Day also invites us to consider the power of death in all its aspects. Death does not just mean *my* list of the departed. It means *your* list, too. And it means all those places where there is grieving, and sorrow, and

¹ Didion, Joan, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 27.

² See Lohfink, Gerhard, *Is This All There Is?: On Resurrection and Eternal Life* (Liturgical Press, 2020)

pain. It means all those places where human beings struggle to overcome the temptation to believe that death is the strongest thing there is.

And the powerful, and quite serious, business of this day is to walk to the edge of the grave, to acknowledge death and refuse to worship it. This means praying for the gift of perseverance should the waves of grief threaten to swallow us up. This means depending on the faith and the prayers of others when grief makes prayer impossible. This means being present to the grieving friend even though their grief frightens and unsettles us. It means being attentive to all those places where death is powerful and tries to reign and, when we stray into those terrible places it means asking Jesus to help us to choose life and not death.

As some of you know my younger brother, Bill, died suddenly early on the morning of October 21. His funeral took place five days later. After the funeral Mass, we processed by car to a nearby cemetery where my parents and two of my other brothers are buried. It was a raw, rainy, wet autumn day, so I presided at the Committal Service indoors, in one of the cemetery chapels. Afterwards, José and I, my youngest brother, Patrick, and my nephew William Robert, named for his father, walked to the plot where my brother's newly opened grave awaited us. Two rough young men,

gravediggers, who I would certainly stay well clear of if I came upon them in a bar, stood apart from us until my brother's body arrived. And then those two tough young men moved quietly forward and with the utmost skill and the greatest respect they gently lowered my brother into the ground.

In our first reading this afternoon Saint Paul assures his Christians, who were so young in the faith, that God's love is not hedged in by created things like time or space. The beloved dead of the Thessalonians have not died too soon. They are not "out of luck." Because, Paul says, the power of God's life and God's love has the power to lift up, hold up, raise up, indeed, even to raise the dead. Saint Paul puts it this way, using words of raising and rising, "And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

To stand at the grave of a loved one is a hard thing to do. It is a task that makes you intensely aware of bodily things, physical things, the rain, the mud, the beat-up flowers on the ground, the color of the coffin, your husband's shivering in the cold, the funeral director's raincoat, the terrible fact of death. But the odd thing is this: if you're lucky, if you're blessed, if you don't give

up, there is an odd beauty to be found there too, if you let your eyes see, if you refuse to deny the stunning beauty and sacredness of life, if you refuse to surrender to despair, if you refuse to grieve “as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

And it is love, the surprising gift of love, which we humans could never have invented on our own, love, given to us by the one who is Love itself (1 John 4:8), it is that Love that can make the graveside a place not of despair, but of hope. And it is Love that allows us to say, “All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia” (Book of Common Prayer 1979, 482–83).

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