

A Reflection from Revd Ali Massey for All Saints' Day

Trigger warning: this reflection is about what happens when those we love die.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we heard the amazing introduction to the Sermon on the Mount that we call the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1 – 12). The beatitudes are sometimes described as the most fundamental teachings of Christ. So much so, that they are sometimes called the 'Jesus manifesto'. They are a call to arms for all Christians to change the world in which we live, to one that is closer to the kingdom of God.

Each verse calls us to action, each verse is a challenge to us to subvert the values of the world and to work for the values of the kingdom of God. There is so much in the Beatitudes that I could do an entire sermon series on them, but I guess that you all would like to go home sometime before it gets dark! So, I thought that, as we remembering All Souls' and All Saints' day then we would look at just one verse:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (Matthew 5: 4)

There are no words to express the pain of a dearly beloved dying. The raw, overwhelming grief followed by the disbelief that the world is still turning even though the beloved has died.

One of the strange and beautiful consequences of intense loss, is that our hearts are torn open toward eternity. We no longer exist just in this time and space. We are keenly aware of our hearts being held by one who lives beyond this world and this time. Our hearts live both within and beyond the borders of what we can see and touch.

Today, we think about how this is the right time to name this paradox, how we live in the now and the not yet. Somehow, now and eternity are bound together in a deep mystery when we realise that death does not release us from being in relationship with one another.

On this remembering day, as we both grieve for and celebrate our loved ones, we know they endure within us. They hold our hearts and encompass us with a fierce and stubborn love that persists across time and space.

Death remains the greatest mystery and our experience of the death of a loved one, raises all kinds of questions regarding who we are as human beings, what is life all about, what happens after this human existence, and if how do we prepare for it? What does it mean to live and to die well?

This strange paradoxical relationship between life and death is what lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Every week we gather in this church and celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. God's final victory over death. Within the Christian faith, the strands of lament and hope, loss and thanksgiving, judgement and mercy are woven into the assurance that death has lost its sting and love is ultimately victorious. Jesus sums up this paradox in verse 4 of the Beatitudes, 'blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'. Jesus tells us that death is not all there is. There is more to life than this. Life in all eternity, lived with and through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Death is as variable as we are. Not all of us will die of old age in our own beds surrounded by our loving families. Unfortunately, many of you will have lost your loved ones way too young or unexpectedly or in an unforeseen circumstance. For many, losing someone we love, really challenges our faith in a loving merciful God. But that is where those strands of lament, hope, loss, thanksgiving and mercy all come into play.

We lament the death of our loved one because of the love and attachment that we have felt for them, the lack of their physical presence and because of the value we place on God's gift of life. This is where the thanksgiving comes in, we thank God for the God-given gifts that were present

during well-lived lives and the blessings that we received by having that person in our lives, for however brief a time.

When we lose someone, we love we often feel vulnerable and suffer pain and despair. The Christian hope of life after death is a hope that is rooted in the confidence and joy of Christ's resurrection. Everlasting life that has come through suffering and death. The good news of Easter day resurrection exists in the shadow of the horror of Good Friday. There isn't, unfortunately, any evasion of pain or suffering in the event of losing someone we love, but we can hope in the promise of eternal life through Christ Jesus. We can be comforted in our mourning because of Jesus' promise to us.

As St Paul tells us in his letter to the early church in Rome, 'for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'. (Romans 8: 38,39)

Death does not separate us from the love of God. By striving to embody that grace, mercy and love to each other while we live, as well as when we die, we will be living and dying in the hope of eternal life through the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour.

I'd like to finish by sharing a poem with you called Tomb by Ann Lewin

The place of remembering:
where, as the work of grief is done,
memory recovers its perspective.

Letting the dead one go,
with aching sense of loss,
opens the way to finding again
a rounded person, gifts and faults
delights and irritations;
makes it possible to share again
the jokes, the intimate glance,
keep company unseen.

May the God of love bless you and grant you comfort and peace
Amen