

All Souls

Three things have occurred in my life over the past year which has made me think more about death – an event we all have to face at some time in our lives.

The first two occurred at Avondrust late last year. I took Communion to one lady who in answer to my question on how she was, was “I becoming very weary of life. But I suppose seeing I’m in my middle 90s that ok.” What should have been my response? “No rubbish you still young and you have plenty to look forward to...” or, as in fact I said, “At that age I think you are allowed to be weary of life.” This seemed to surprise her and she said, “Oh do you think so? You’ve made me feel much better.” And so after giving her communion I went on to the next room where there was a lady I had anointed some three months before because her family believed that she was about to demise. But she was still just hanging in there. In fact she hung in there for another 3 months. But on that day she was aware and awake but barely able to lift her head from the pillow. What should have been my response to her? “My dear, now is the time for you to fade away”?

Finally, November last year I went to the memorial service of a close friend, former choir member and godparent to Kate. Judith was one of those ladies who seemed so in control of her life, her health and her spirituality. In August she was climbing mountains in the Silvermine Nature Reserve, then a backache followed by a lung X-ray and then a scan showed she was riddled with cancer and within two months she was dead.

St Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan wrote, “Death is gain and life a penalty” and he goes on to quote Paul, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” So he seems to be saying that death is not a disappearance in some black hole but rather that we die with Christ in order to live with him. Ambrose goes on to suggest that we should be in a daily habit and disposition towards dying. For it is in dying to the small things of life that we learn to die with Christ. What “small things” am I referring to? Oh there are so many! Relationships and friendships that end; neighbours who move away; ways of doing things but also the lusts of this world, the law of the flesh.

But we have a healer from these deaths. Our remedy is Christ’s grace. Ambrose says we should exile ourselves from our bodies or we will exile ourselves from Christ. Christ has redeemed the world by his death. Christ need not have died unless he had willed it, yet he did not think it a shameful death to die on a cross or that there was any better way to save us than by dying. So Christ’s death is everyone’s life. We and all our loved ones departed are signed and sealed by his death. It is his death we proclaim when we preach, when we pray, when we offer the sacrifice of this Eucharist.

Is Christ’s death a thing to be mourned? No. Because by his death, death itself has redeemed death. So the death of a loved one, those who we are commemorating today, is in fact the begin of salvation for them and for us. The Son of God did not despise death, therefore we should not flee from death. Certainly death is not part of nature, but was made a part of it afterwards. God did not ordain death in the beginning of things but God gave it to us as a remedy when sin brought toil and tears into human life.

Our souls must free themselves from the toils of this life and from the stain of fallen human nature and be like the Psalmist who wrote: “One thing I have asked from the Lord, which I will require : that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, To see the fair beauty of the Lord : and to seek his will in his temple.”

Those three events in my life over the past year have demonstrated to me that death is not something which we should avoid but something which draws us closer to God through the death of his Son Jesus. So as we commemorate our loved ones today remember that their deaths are preparations for our own death, knowing we can face that with courage and grace.