

## IN THE HAND OF GOD

Wisdom 3. 1-9

1 Peter 1. 3-9

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Isn't it a wonderful thing, a comforting thing, to know that those whom we love, 'our dearest and our best', when they die, are in the hand of God where no torment will ever touch them? In the sight of the world and the unwise, they seem to perish; but they are at peace, and free not only from the torments of sickness, frailty and old age, but also of the other torments of this life, of which there are many. They are in the loving hand of God, that place where there is no sorrow or crying, no sighing or anguish, no pain or tears. Depending upon the circumstances, death can be a welcomed event; a release from suffering; and almost a friend. Or death can be a thief and a destroyer, a fearful enemy. But however they leave this world, the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, where no torment will ever touch them. They have not perished. They are at peace. This is a comfort which cannot be taken away.

At this Choral Evensong in Thanksgiving and Remembrance of the Departed, we therefore face death squarely with the hope of life. Our Lord is the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in him, though he dies, yet shall he live; and he who lives and believes in him will never die (Jn 11. 25). There is, then, life that endures through sickness and death; through sorrow and loss; and through every form of torment that afflicts humankind. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Christ, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

'Sleep' is the name that our Lord gave to death. 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep', he said, 'but I am going there to awaken him' (Jn 11. 11). Jesus called Lazarus from

his grave back to life in this world. That miracle is a sign of what Christ will do for all of us on the Day of Resurrection at the end of time. There will be a great wake-up call. The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. There is 'life *after life*, after death', which means that the souls of the righteous sleep in the peace of God and then will rise in the glory of the Resurrection, clothed in an immortal body like our risen Lord.

What happened to Jesus on Easter was the first instalment of God's promise of immortal life for his people, that is, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. We are assured of this today by St Peter, who writes in his letter, 'By his great mercy (God) has given us a new birth into a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you' (1. 3-4).

We most certainly do have hope. Christ has died for our sins, and he is risen from the dead. He presides in glory over his Church and the whole world. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. He will descend from heaven with the cry of command, with the Archangel Michael's call, and with the blast of the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first. Then those who are alive will be joined with them, and they will be caught up together with them into heaven to be with our Lord for ever. Thus we pray today for all the departed, that the unsearchable benefits of Jesus's sacrifice will be theirs, and that they will be manifested on that great Day of Judgement as God's children.

When we pray for the departed, we engage in an activity which brings the essentials of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the fore. First of all, we stand on the central fact of all facts; namely, that our Lord died and rose again. St Paul tells us that if Christ is not raised, the dead have indeed perished; our faith is vain, and we are still in our

sins. But Christ is most certainly risen from the dead, the ‘first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep’.

Secondly, in praying for the dead, we ask God to complete and bring to perfection the good work he began in them while they were here on earth, to cleanse them from every stain, and to prepare them for the Beatific Vision of Heaven.

The dead are not at all out of our Lord’s reach, not one of them. As Jesus himself said, ‘Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live’ (Jn 5. 25). And he continued by saying, ‘Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away’ (Jn 6. 37).

Dear friends, that voice is heard not only here on earth through the preaching, teaching, worship and witness of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. With grace and power, that voice penetrates the realms of the departed souls and spirits; and those who hear it, those who ‘love his appearing’ (2 Tim 4. 8), will live.

Yes, it a most blessed comfort to know that, whatever the circumstances of their deaths, the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, where no torment will ever touch them. Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them. May the souls of the faithful, and of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Amen.