

## PRAYERS THAT COUNT

Lamentations 3. 17-26, 31-33

Romans 5. 5-11

John 6. 37-40

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

Our appointed text from St John's gospel takes us for the second time to Galilee at the time of the Passover. At the beginning of chapter 6 we read, 'After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee ... Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near' (6. 1, 4). A large crowd kept following him (6. 2) and our Lord, seeing the crowd that followed him, multiplies the loaves and feeds the five thousand. The crowd then wants to proclaim him king, but Christ disappears and goes up to the mountain alone (6. 15). The story continues the next day (6. 22) when the crowd seeks Jesus again. When they find him, our Lord declares that he is the bread of life, and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry, and that whoever believes in him will never be thirsty (6. 35). It is in this context that Christ announces, 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day' (6. 39, 40).

Jesus does not reject those who come to him. Rather, he gives them eternal life. His mission is to *seek and save* those who are lost (Lk 19. 27). And those *of us who seek* are invited to move from curiosity to faith. Our Lord is open to 'anyone who comes'. This is a good reminder for those of us within the flock, and it is a good reminder for those who may feel distanced from Jesus or from the Church. The Father's very will and desire is that all those who come to Christ will be raised.

How do we come to eternal life, then? We see the Son and believe. We enter into a relationship with him by faith, and eternal life is ours.

On this All Souls' Day, we remember the faithful departed, the numerous ordinary people through the centuries who have lived and died trusting in God, and who faced life's ups and downs with faith. Each of us has names and faces that we remember, our own faithful departed for whose influence we thank God. Our presence here is perhaps a testimony to their influence on us for good.

As we commemorate the faithful departed and pray for them, we take comfort in the promise of Jesus. 'Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away'. There is great comfort that our Lord wants to be with us, not only in this life, but beyond death. Those who have died are in the care of our loving God.

We have only to look elsewhere in the Scriptures for confirmation of this. Christ prayed for the dead son of the widow of Nain; and his words took the form of a command that restored the man to life (Lk 7. 11-17). Jesus also prayed for Lazarus, again with a word of command; and his great friend was restored to life (Jn 11. 38-44). What's more, in the early Christian Church, we are told that the apostles prayed for people who had died. In the Book of Acts, St Peter knelt down and prayed for Tabitha (or Dorcas), a woman who had made many articles of clothing for others and who had departed this life ; and after he prayed, she opened her eyes and sat up (9. 36-43).

In these particular cases, the prayers of our Lord and the apostles were for a restoration of *physical life*; but this does not mean that our prayers for the *spiritual life* of the departed are without consequence. Let none of us criticise such prayers, because God hears them and understands them; and the boundless, compassionate mercy and love of our God are never to be underestimated.

Not only do our prayers help the departed in ways we do not fully understand; but praying for them helps us as well. It keeps their remembrance alive in us, helping our hearts to stay warm and full of love towards them. It gives us a way to experience a sense of their presence, since prayer is far more than simply the making of requests. It keeps them before our eyes as living examples of Christian faith for us to emulate. Prayer for the departed also gives us another way to continue in the awesome privilege of participating in God's ongoing work of the salvation, sanctification, and glorification of every soul whom he draws to himself.

As a contemporary British theologian (Bishop Kallistos Ware of the Eastern Orthodox Church) wrote, 'Just as...Christians here on earth pray for one another and ask for one another's prayers, so they pray also for the faithful departed and ask the faithful departed to pray for them. Death cannot sever the bond of mutual love which links the members of the Church together.'

And in that sure and confident hope, we are invited to participate in the Eucharist, a foretaste and anticipation of that one day when, as the Eucharistic Prayer will remind us, Jesus will gather into his kingdom all who share the one bread and one cup so that we, in the company of all the saints and all the faithful departed, may praise and glorify God for ever through Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

Amen.