

REST IN PEACE AND RISE IN GLORY

Amos 5. 18-24

1 Thessalonians 4. 13-18

Matthew 25. 1-13

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

Whom are we remembering on Remembrance Sunday? This observance initially began in the United Kingdom in response to the staggering casualties of the First World War. But the ‘remembrance’ grew as time went on: World War Two and subsequent wars have produced long lists of those who have given their lives in the service of their countries. Into the Requiem Mass that we will celebrate today are folded many heartfelt sacrifices and losses, commended to the love and safekeeping of Almighty God.

Our appointed epistle reading from 1 Thessalonians invites us reflect on what the Church teaches about death and the departed.

First of all, the Church teaches the reality of death. Death is not an illusion; it is a certainty. As the Psalmist writes, ‘As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more’ (103. 15).

Humankind was not created to die. Death is contrary to the eternal plan and will of God. Had the human race not sinned – that is, had we not turned away from our life-source which is our relationship with God – humankind would have been immune and free from death. Instead, as the book of Genesis teaches us, in Adam and Eve we turned ourselves out of Paradise. Ever since the Fall, ‘the wages of sin

is death'.¹ Sin is separation from God, and separation from God is lethal. Mortality is our condition.

Death is the close of our mortal life's experiences. Death puts an end to the time that we have to accept or reject God's grace, as manifested in the mercy of Christ. So when we die, we will receive from God what it is we have chosen: either heaven and eternal life in our enjoyment of God; or hell and eternal death in our rejection of him.

Both the Old Testament and the wisdom of the ancient Greeks envisioned a shadowy place for the spirits of the departed. The Jews called it 'Sheol' and the Greeks called it 'Hades'. But one could hardly think of such abodes as the hope of immortal glory. To give them credit, the ancient Jews did develop a hope of Resurrection at the end of time.

However, since the death of our Lord, the discovery of his empty tomb, and the manifesting of his Resurrection, everything has changed; and it has changed for ever. The Jewish hope of Resurrection has now been brought to a real fulfilment in time. To quote St Paul in today's epistle, 'Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.'

The Scriptures show us that the condition of those who have died is literally an intermediate state. St Paul calls it 'sleep' or 'rest', from which the dead will be awakened. And what an alarm clock that will be! 'We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable' (I Cor 15. 51-52). In the words of 1 Thessalonians, 'the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive,

¹ Cf. Rom 6. 23.

who are left, will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.’

We the living, and the departed, are in the ‘meantime’ between Jesus’s Resurrection and his Triumphal Return to judge the world. The faithful departed rest in Christ, in whose safekeeping they are prepared for the ‘Beatific Vision’ of God in heaven. All of the departed who have not closed themselves to the grace of God belong to the people of God; and they therefore belong to our Lord. They too will long for his appearing.² Today, we pray for the departed who served their countries; and we hold them in our love; we pray that the good work that was begun in them in this life will be brought to perfection on that Day.

Heaven is the perfect life within God, a communion of life and love within the Most Holy Trinity, with the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints and angels, in a redeemed creation. It is the Beatific Vision of God and the joy of reunions with, and introductions to all of heaven’s citizens. Heaven is the fulfilment of the purpose and meaning of human life, the perfection and consummation of the deepest human longing, and the state of supreme, definitive happiness. All of this has been made possible by the triumph of Jesus Christ.

I am sure that you will agree with me when I say that heaven surpasses our comprehension. The Scriptures portray heaven in words that evoke magnificent images: light, peace, music, choirs, visual splendour, a wedding feast, a banquet, the Father’s house, the heavenly city of Jerusalem, and Paradise restored. Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

² Cf. 2 Tim 4. 8.

Today on Remembrance Sunday, let us bless the Lord, who has changed the Valley of the Shadow of Death into a place of peaceful hope and joyful anticipation. On the other side of death is most assuredly a 'better place', which opens out into a new heaven and a new earth, and a bright shining city of God. That city is full of wonderful saints, known and unknown; and it includes the men and women who contributed valiantly and courageously to the Two World Wars and to later conflicts. As we remember them, we are reminded that Christ has opened up this kingdom and shown us that there is nothing to fear, and everything to hope for, far beyond our imagining.

Let us therefore redeem what time we still have left. A great cloud of witnesses surrounds us on our way. Glory be to God, who in our Lord has conquered death, our last enemy, and made it the passageway to life everlasting.

Amen.