

[Readings: Wisdom 3:1-9, Psalm 23, Romans 5:5-11 and the Gospel of John 6:37-40.]

Yesterday the Church celebrated the Solemnity of All Saints and we acknowledged the great cloud of saints who surround us and support us with their prayers. Today we commemorate All Souls who have died and have not yet achieved their final destination of heaven but are held up in purgatory for a final purification and preparation for heaven. We are called to support these souls with our prayers that God with his infinite mercy will admit them into the fullness of his presence in heaven.



Of course, there is sadness when a friend or family member dies, but, in the end, it is our faith that enables us to surrender our mourning and be joyful in our memories. This faith is reflected and eloquently expressed by the author of Wisdom in our first reading.

This Wisdom text is quite remarkable in that it exhibits the development of Israel's understanding of death and immortality. Up until around two hundred years before the time of Christ, Jewish believers were of the mind that death was the end of every creature's existence and that only God was immortal. Gradually, there came the realization that human beings were blessed with an immortal spirit that survived death. Written around sixty years before the time of Christ, our first reading clearly says that death is not the end but a passage unto peace in the presence of God.

In our second reading today from his letter to the Romans, Paul revels in the gift of Jesus. His amazement at such a blessing is contagious. How can we not be equally grateful for the extent of God's love, which, as Paul says, "has been poured out into our hearts"? As proof of this immeasurable love, Christ died for us "while we were still sinners." Perhaps this truth might encourage those who worry that a loved one who has died was not on good terms with God. With love and mercy, God cherishes and forgives sinners. How can we doubt the magnanimity of One who gave the life of his only Son to reconcile sinners? Rather than worry, believers are urged to leave their concerns in the hands of God and trust in God's beneficent will.

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans to introduce himself and his beliefs to a community he had never visited. He was aware that some in Rome were suspicious of his teachings and his methods. Some also questioned his right to be called an apostle. To address their concerns, Paul set forth what some have called his Gospel. The reading we hear today represents one of the high points in his message.

Here, Paul celebrates and reveres the magnanimous love of God, which is the source of our salvation. In telling of God's love, Paul uses the Greek word 'agape'; this is a love not inspired by the attractiveness or deservedness of the one who is loved. God loves with his quality of love because God is love. The love, not merited or measured, is "poured out," says Paul, and is given full expression in our salvation through the death on the cross of Jesus. Paul says, "God proves his love for us," because Christ died for us while we were still sinners. This great love of God expressed in Jesus justifies sinners with God; that is, we are set in a right relationship with God. To put it another way, we are saved, and each day we work and cooperate with God in the process of our salvation.

In response to such good news, Paul calls upon believers to "boast of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation". Paul encourages the Romans to boast in God because sinners have been given the gift of reconciliation. Reconciliation does not refer to the movement of a person toward God. Rather, reconciliation is the action of God, who loves with immeasurable intensity, drawing the sinner closer and closer until God and sinner are one.

The assurance Jesus offers in today's Gospel will enliven the hope of every believing sinner. "Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away," promises Jesus. This great love of Jesus came to a climax on the cross. Drawn together at that moment of sacrifice were all his actions throughout his ministry — his touching of a leper, his tenderness toward the sick and the bereaved, his tears at the grave of Lazarus. In all these actions and especially on the cross, we see the deeply human and God-filled Jesus keeping his promise: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself".

With so many assurances of God's love, our hearts can be at peace as we entrust those who have gone before us to God. When death comes knocking at our door it is always a sacred time and an occasion for the family and the parish family to come together in prayer. We are to invite God into our lives as we recall those we have loved. In prayer, we can be in communion with them. Perhaps the most beautiful tribute we can give to a deceased loved one is not just a cold stone to mark where they are buried, but a living memory that is nourished by prayer, gratitude and ever-deepening affection.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholic funerals reflect a more hope-filled and positive attitude. Up until 1967, black vestments were required for the funeral Mass, and the liturgy was called the Mass of the Dead. Now, white vestments are used for celebrating the Mass of the Resurrection. Joyful songs are sung, as the entire congregation joins together to give one of their own a worthy and prayerful sendoff.

Imagine for a moment a child in the womb — a thinking child, who observes and contemplates. This child notices its eyes and wonders, “What are these for?” There is nothing much to see in here. And so on with its ears, its hands, its mouth. “What are these for?”

Then this observant, contemplative child is born into this world and realizes, “My eyes are for beholding the one who loves me; my ears for hearing her voice; my hands for touching her face; my mouth for suckling, kissing, and speaking words of love.”

Perhaps we should pray to be as observant and contemplative as this imaginary child. What are these for, this mind that longs for the infinite; this spirit that reaches for heights and depths beyond this world; this heart that aches with love? Perhaps when we are born into the next world, we’ll find out.

The image of Jesus the Good Shepherd that we heard proclaimed in the psalm today is a very comforting image. It assures us that Jesus not only feeds us and gives us drink, but he also protects us as we travel through the dark valley into the fullness of life. He is there at our side as we continue the journey of purification to the face of God. Though we are weak and vulnerable, we can rely on his rod and his staff.

Our commemoration of All Souls Day is not a time of sadness but one of great hope and confidence. It invites us to entrust our dead to God, because we know they really belong to God. We know that if we have loved them, God has loved them much more. They are in God's care, and God will lead them to peace.