

33rd Sunday (B)

14th November 2021

'May eternal light shine upon them'

Dan 12: a time of great distress

Ps 15: You will not let Your beloved

know decay

Heb 10: *Christ has offered one single sacrifice for sins*

Mk 13: 24–32: *the second coming*

Is that Gospel passage supposed to be frightening us, do you think? All that talk of cosmic disasters, the light of sun and moon and stars fading out at the end of the world. As we come towards the end of the Church's year (just 2 wks to go till Advent), the readings draw our attention to the passing of material things: even the things that to our short lifespan look fixed and permanent, the vast things of space, sun, moon and stars; yet they are not permanent. A long-term scientific view makes this quite clear. In fact, it's only their changing and passing that makes our existence even possible: the atomic elements that make up the bodies of living things, ourselves included, were forged inside a previous generation of stars that died and exploded billions of years ago. Jesus reminds us that the material world passes, and that that's part of His divine plan. But that other things remain. And so the 'fright' that the passage seems to contain is countered by the reassurance that Jesus

then utters: "*The Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory ... Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.*" I imagine those words booming out across the universe, reminding us of what really matters, giving us hope. More permanent than the vast structures of space, Our Lord's message is timeless and trustworthy. We can rely on Him without any fears: He is the Creator of all, but prizes our spiritual relationship with Him above all other things.

November itself is a month of contrasts, isn't it? The leaves are falling, and litter the paths, and maybe — as we have all loved doing since childhood — we rustle through those fallen leaves as we walk along, enjoying the sound and feel of that. The fallen leaves remind us of the decay at the heart of nature, the place of death. But November can also bring out the most vivid, glorious colours of the changing trees especially if the sun shines on them: autumnal colour is one of the loveliest natural sights of the seasonal cycle. I guess that autumn is a season which some love, and others loathe: the autumnal trees and

the fallen leaves are rather lovely, but the closing-in of the days and the increasing wet and cold is not so lovely. We begin to long for the return of the spring and the warm. It's no surprise that the Church places at this time of year the remembrance of the dead, is it? As nature is dying back, so we turn our minds to the dead of our acquaintance. In this country we keep Remembrance Sunday on this Sunday nearest the 11th Nov — Armistice Day, the date in 1918 when the guns fell silent and the 'Great' War ended — so we also have the sombre reminder of the dead of that war, and of so many wars in the 20th c.

As Christians we remember the dead as if (as in nature) there is a promised return to something lovelier. Imagine we were facing November with no Spring to follow! How depressing would that be! Imagine we were actually seeing the leaves fall for ever; the darkness getting darker for ever. Instead it's precisely the hope of Spring that gets us through these dark, damp days. And so with death: we are saddened by the death of our loved ones, whether they had a short or a long life, a healthy one or a

sick one; we miss them, but we have real and well-founded hope that springs eternal.

The readings themselves urge us to that Christian hope in the face of death ... Daniel's powerful prophecy of the end of time (in the 1st reading) and Jesus's description of the end-time too (in the Gospel) both set scenes of hope alongside the disasters. Daniel speaks of "*those who lie sleeping in the dust of the earth: many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace*" (a distinction we would equate with the difference between heaven and hell). And then Jesus Himself says: "*They will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory, ... [and] send His angels to gather His chosen from the ... ends of the world.*" Clearly there is resurrection and glory promised us by God in the face of death.

When we remember our deceased loved ones, we need that reassurance that comes from the mouth of our Blessed Lord. No more than the universe is permanent, is our earthly life. We might try to live as if our life on earth is fixed and permanent, but it's just not true, and we

mustn't live as if it is. The Lord doesn't say this to frighten us, but so that He might offer the reassurance that He, as the risen, almighty Lord, alone can do: "*My words will not pass away.*" His Gospel is the lifeline that we hold on to in the face of mortal death. The material of this universe, and our earthly bodies, are not made for eternity, but our souls, and our remade, glorified, risen, bodies re-joined to our souls at the final Resurrection, are. This is the heart of the Good News: Jesus's words rings out across the universe, and across all time; His words that shall not pass away. The Gospel is always one of divine reassurance, in the face of the fright that we may sometimes feel as weak, frail creatures of dust.

This hope brings us with great confidence to offer our prayers and Masses for the dead. God's desire for humanity is that we spend our eternity with Him in heavenly happiness. But we are very unlikely to be immediately ready for heaven when we die. A few saints may be, but the rest of us will definitely need that purifying, and painful, time of Purgatory to have the rust of

sin's effects burnt off, and be prepared for the glory of God's holy presence. It's the prayers and Masses of the Church here on earth that ease the souls in Purgatory to heavenly reward. The Mass is, as the 2nd reading says, that *one single sacrifice for sins* which Christ has offered on the Cross and in His resurrection. Jesus Christ, the Risen One, is the one and only access to the resurrection, so when we contemplate death — and when we want to pray for and help the dead — there is simply no better place to come to than the Mass; no-one better to come to than Jesus Christ. Here we receive His divine comfort in the face of death: a deep and lasting peace comes to us by associating the death of our loved ones (and indeed one day our own death) with the triumph of Jesus over death. He has real and Godly power over life and death, and He isn't reluctant to share it with us. *By virtue of that one single offering, He has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom He is sanctifying.* Jesus's Resurrection light shines powerfully in the midst of darkness and sorrow; and that same healing, forgiving, resurrecting, light shines out from the Holy

Eucharist of the Mass, for the Blessed Sacrament truly *is* the risen Jesus. We pray that perpetual light shine on, and give relief to, and ultimate rest to, the deceased. It is right and good that we offer the sacrifice of the Mass for our departed loved ones, and indeed for all the dead. My daily Mass intention throughout November is for the deceased that you have remembered and recorded in our chapel ‘Book of the Dead’ (and I urge you all to keep adding names there, if you have not yet done so, for these Masses for the Holy Souls will continue till the end of the month).

As we bring these Holy Souls in prayer to the Lord with great love, it is with that strong sense of Christian hope that the Lord gives us. Some of our deceased loved ones may have lived long and richly varied lives; others may have been taken from this world young, or after great suffering. The Lord doesn’t give us reasons or an expectation of a long life or a short one, any more than He gives us an indication of when He will bring all things to their close at the end of the world. It’s not something that He gives us to know, in His wisdom. We thank Our Lord

for those who have lived amongst us and gave us so much as our families, friends and fellow pilgrims in life. We ask that God apply to them the even greater gifts of forgiveness, and eternal life; and to help us in our bereavement to have the reassurance that He gives, and not the fear that the world that lives as if without God gives.

Let’s take this Mass as a special occasion to pray for our deceased friends and family. It’s not through our own efforts that they will come to heaven, but through the power of the Risen Son of God: but it *is* our place to plead and pray for that. We would be neglecting our Christian duty if we did not pray for the dead. They were good to us in life; one day they will do good for us in heaven; in the meantime, we keep the repose of the Holy Souls in fervent prayer here at Mass. We can do nothing better for them than that! Let’s gaze into the visions of the night, and see with the eyes of faith the Lord Jesus in His cosmic victory, bringing His elect, His beloved people, through the time of trial and sadness to the bliss of eternity. *Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace.*