

32nd Sunday (C)

6th November 2022

‘November Devotions: Praying for the Dead’

2Macc 7: *it is for His laws that we die, to live again for ever.*

Ps 16: *I shall be filled when I awake with the sight of your glory, O Lord.*

2Thess 2: — Lk 20:27–38: *He is God not of the dead, but of the living.*

The readings that the Church has given us this Sunday are very much in keeping with the special focus of November as the *month of devotion for the Holy Souls*, when we pray especially that God forgive them their sins and give them peace and eternal rest in a life after death.

Before Christ there had been a lot of debate about life after death. The traditional Jewish position had been that death took one to *Sheol* (Gk, *Hades*), which was not a life at all, but a place of shades and shadows, a non-life of near oblivion. But as the People of Israel meditated on this position, another belief would keep arising, the belief that God’s love for His people could not do this: as one of the psalms says, *You will not leave my soul among the dead, nor let Your beloved know decay.* Nevertheless, in all the 100s of pages of the OT, there are barely 10 references to the resurrection of the dead, and few of them unambiguous. Only in later writings, such as 2 Maccabees, written

<200yrs BC, there are some quite explicit references to belief in an after-life. E.g. in our 1st reading, the mother and her 7 sons bravely face martyrdom — mutilation and death — knowing that God whose laws they keep will refashion them in a new and better life afterwards.

So, by the time of Jesus, there *was* a current of belief in the resurrection, especially amongst the Pharisees, but not by any means 100% accepted. As the Gospel recalls, the religious party of the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, and they came to mock Jesus’s teachings which they saw as promoting belief in heaven. Don’t forget, Jesus’s teachings on the rewards of heaven were not being taught in an atmosphere that already accepted this, but in a very mixed theological situation. Some simply did not believe what He was saying — and were happy to propose stories like this woman with seven successive husbands, to try and catch Him out.

The scenario which the Sadducees put to Jesus is an attempt to reduce to an absurdity the idea of the resurrection of the dead, which they understood as some

sort of continuation of this present life. So they reckoned that it must either imply silly notions such as this woman with seven husbands to choose from, or else there simply is no resurrection and death comes as the absolute end. But, teaching there in the Temple, Jesus explains to them otherwise. “God,” He says, “*is not God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him.*” There is no slipping away into nothingness after death, but on the last day, for the just, a resurrection of the dead to new life. There will be no dying again, and hence no physical need for the marrying which the Sadducees had problems with.

That still leaves us wondering ‘What will our bodies be for, in heaven?’ We believe that after some period in which the souls of the departed exist as mere spirits, there will eventually be a resurrection of the dead — that is, a resurrection of the body. Heaven isn’t a place where we will float around forever as ghostly presences, engaging in telepathic praise of God. Since we have been made by God as flesh and blood, so we will be returned to our proper bodily nature one day. To be without our body for all

eternity wouldn’t be natural for us. It would be like those stricken by illness, leaving them understanding everything going on around them but utterly unable to move their bodies or communicate at all. To be in heaven like that would be pleasant enough since we would be in the hands of God — but it would also be ultimately unnatural.

Of course, we have one very big aid to our understanding which those Sadducees did not: the bodily resurrection of Jesus. To crown all that He *said*, Jesus *proved* His word to be true when on Easter morning He was raised from the dead. In His glorious risen body we begin to see what He has in store for us in heaven if we believe in Him. We shall be like Him, able to relate to people in a new and normal human way, as He did after His resurrection. “*It is I myself,*” He was to say to His disciples, “*handle me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.*” In our flesh we shall see God and glorify Him with our bodies, and we shall love deeply and perfectly those we have always loved, even if there’ll be no need for the physicality of marriage.

Jesus affirms very clearly that there will be a resurrection of the dead. Yet, after 20 centuries of preaching this Good News, still there are sceptics, “those who say there is no resurrection.” But what more could God do to convince us? — He has come Himself and told us, and He has shown us His risen self!

This Christian faith underlies all that we do in regard to the dying and the deceased:

1. For a start, we honour the *bodies* of the terminally ill, the dying, and those who have died. It starts with the way we treat the dying: our faith vigorously opposes the deliberate killing of the terminally ill, and instead promotes the best in palliative care and in loving accompaniment as someone comes towards the end of their life. It goes totally against the gift of human life from God if we ever take it into our own hands to end another’s life (or even our own) unnaturally. The dignity that we afford the body we have in this life means that euthanasia is gravely wrong; it is not our place to put to death this body He has given us. We should all be vigilant that those who are coming into the latter stages

of their life receive the sacraments: Confession and Holy Communion if their condition allows for it; and also the Anointing of the Sick to give them strength in their suffering.

2. When death does occur, we continue to give due respect to the body of the deceased. This means that we do not just discard it, but we continue to treat it with dignity, and therefore to preserve the body carefully until the time of the funeral. Sometimes it is right that post-mortem examinations have to be carried out — or are done with the aim of understanding an illness or disease — and the Church accepts this as necessary and good for the treatment of others in the future. Also, the Church believes that organ donation is an admirable option, to give a better life to someone in need of a transplant; but this can only happen once the donor is fully, clinically dead, and then only with the explicit consent of the deceased (e.g. by carrying an organ-donor card) — consent can never be just presumed. Occasionally, someone may choose to give their whole body “to science,” though it would still be normal afterwards for the body to be returned for burial.

3. Prior to the funeral, it is a pious practice to pray in the presence of the dead body, and so the priest will always be willing to attend with a family to lead prayers, e.g. at the undertaker's chapel of rest.
4. The funeral for a Catholic should take place in a Catholic Church, and it is usual for this to take place within the Holy Mass, since this is the best possible prayer and the very sacrifice of Jesus offered for their soul. No Catholic should ordinarily be laid to rest with a quick crematorium service or graveside prayers. So, please, if you have any doubts that a family member might not be honoured with a proper Catholic funeral Mass in church, then it should be written in to their will. The Church still considers that burial is the norm for a Christian; but cremation is not prohibited as long as the burning of the body is not chosen as a deliberate expression against our faith in the resurrection.
5. If cremation is chosen, the Church insists that there is still a burial of the remains: ashes may not under any circumstances be scattered, preserved, or dealt with in any other way than burial. As well as leading the funeral rites, therefore, a priest will always come and accompany

the act of burial of ashes with a short rite of prayer and blessing.

6. As Catholics we continue, long after the burial of our loved ones, in mourning them to *pray* for them. We seek consolation in our sadness through the act of offering frequent prayers for the departed, and asking for occasional Masses to be offered for the repose of their souls, i.e. for them to be forgiven their sins and hastened out of the cleansing time of purgatory and into heavenly rest. The 2nd Book of Maccabees (12:43–45) contains another extraordinary text for OT, pre-Christian times: it records the actions of Judas Maccabeus on behalf of those dead warriors who had sinned against the Jewish laws prohibiting superstitious pagan charms and idols. It's a clear teaching, and a marvellous precursor for our own Christian prayer for the dead. It says:

“[Judas] took a collection from them individually, amounting to nearly two thousand drachmae, and sent it to Jerusalem to have a sacrifice for sin offered, an altogether fine and noble action, in which he took full account of the resurrection. For if he had not expected the fallen to rise again it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead, whereas if he had in view the splendid recompense reserved for those who make a pious end, the thought was holy and devout. This

was why he had this atonement sacrifice offered for the dead, so that they might be released from their sin.”

As a community, in keeping with this “pious, holy & devout practice” of making holy sacrificial offerings for the salvation of the dearly departed, we unite in this time of November in having *a daily Mass* offered for those whose names are recorded in our Newman House *Book of the Dead*. (Do add names after Mass.) This is a powerful act of unity in our various bereavements, drawing us closer to one another in prayer, especially comforting those who have had deaths in recent months.

7. Finally, it is right that we continue to honour our departed loved ones, and it is commendable that our loved ones’ graves are well cared for by the loving attention of relatives. In a parish, I would always lead a Rosary Procession and Blessing of Graves on this 1st Sunday of November, as a mark of respect and an act of joint prayer.

The Lord is God of the living and of the dead — “*for to Him all men are in fact alive*” — and we wish to express our deepest faith in the salvation that Jesus has won for us in His resurrection. Let us with humble and grateful

hearts, therefore, accompany always with prayer those dying, ... and those who have died, ... for they are always dear to us, and they are always precious to the Lord Himself, who gave them life in the first place and who wants that life to be set free from sin, purified, beautified, and made ready for Him in heaven. *May † the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.*