

31<sup>st</sup> Sunday (A)

5<sup>th</sup> November 2023

'November: month of the Holy Souls'

Mal 1–2: *you have caused many to stumble by your teaching*

Ps 130: *O Lord, my heart is not proud*

1Thess 2: *we were eager to hand over our whole lives ...*

Mt 23:1–12: *don't be guided by what they do: they don't practise what they preach*

Dominating the entrance way to the chapel this month is our 'Book of the Dead.' You can't miss it, and please keep adding to it the blessed names of your own dearly departed, as students for many years before you have done. Because, throughout November, month of the Holy Souls, we are recalling prayerfully before God these deceased of our families and of our acquaintance: those people, beloved of our lives, who have gone to the Lord, and for whom we offer prayer and Masses that *eternal light may shine upon them*. In fact, the month of November is rather full of such remembrances, including an acknowledgment of our own mortality, our own earthly end; the month's prayers and Masses for the Holy Souls; our remembrance on Armistice Day, 11<sup>th</sup> November, and on Remembrance Sunday next week, of the war dead; also, too, in these sad months, those dying by the day in the world's conflict zones: the Ukraine, Israel, the Gaza ... All these memories are sombre thoughts

as we reflect on this world, and our short life within it.

As for the deaths of our loved ones, some of them will have been long and drawn out, perhaps after an illness of many years; others may have been quite unexpected, perhaps tragic, and out-of-the-blue. We never know, as Jesus says, the time or the hour. And as we recall with fondness those who have gone before us, we quite naturally think about our own mortality and frailty ... the fact that sometimes we can have quite a tenuous hold on life. This reminder of death, is a *realistic* attitude, which is central to the Christian message. We have the Cross of Christ's death before our eyes each and every day, don't we? It's not unfamiliar to us; it's an ever-present reminder of the human condition, the death that awaits us all, just as it even came to the Son of God made man. As Christians, we are not morbid in having these reminders, but we are realistic: our earthly life does not go on for ever, and nor was it ever meant to. The plan of God has always been that his spiritual creation — men and angels — should ultimately take their place in the *heavenly* kingdom,

towards which this life on earth is a pilgrimage and a preparation.

Because, in the midst of all thoughts of mortality, comes the brilliant shining light of the Gospel. Into the darkness of death shines the bright light of Jesus's Resurrection, and the hope that He brings. In the face of death and the struggle of life — the things that might get us down — Jesus promises Himself, His own life at the heart of ours: not just some vague good example, but His very life and breath, His Sacraments and His Spirit, to inhabit our lives and let us live with His own immortal indestructible life. This is what sustains us Christians each and every day of our life: the fact that this life is not all that there is, but that in fact He wants us to enjoy something far greater, far better, far happier, far more enduring, in eternal life. “Your endurance will win you your lives,” Jesus says ... Our being faithful to Him in this world means that He will reward us for our faithfulness in the next world. We long for that life, don't we? We long to be free of the struggles and disappointments here below, to be united in

faith for ever with the Lord of Glory, in His Resurrection, and with those that we pray will also be with Him, our loved ones. And this is the point of our prayer for the dead: that they and we may all enjoy the presence of God in holiness for ever, together. For that to be the case, both they and we need the forgiveness of our sins; and for this we strive, through the devotions and sacraments that the Lord Jesus has given us here in the Church. He gave us these for our holiness, so that we would not fall away from Him, but be His for ever.

The judgment that awaits us, as Jesus Himself describes it in His sacred teaching, is a natural part of that process. The life that God has given us here on earth is a life that is to be used for good, used in positive ways. We shall be judged, Jesus insists, on whether, and how, we put to good use the gifts He has given us. Naturally, He will demand of us an account of the life He has given us. Did we use our time and talents well; did we misuse them selfishly; or did we simply waste them and squander them without much of a care? If we cannot be trusted with

completing small tokens of goodness here on earth, then we are risking that great and eternal goodness offered in the life to come. Jesus's message is very straightforward. It is of paramount importance that we hear this message! Pope Benedict spoke of judgment a few years ago when he wrote his masterly encyclical letter on 'Christian hope.' He reminded us then: *"Yes, there is a resurrection of the flesh. There is justice. There is an 'undoing' of past suffering, a reparation that sets things aright. For this reason, faith in the Last Judgment is first and foremost hope ... I am convinced that the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, or in any case the strongest argument, in favour of faith in eternal life. The purely individual need for a fulfilment that is denied to us in this life, for an everlasting love that we await, is certainly an important motive for believing that man was made for eternity ..."* (n. 43). The Pope continues to urge us to meditate anew on our needing to be judged: *"A world without God is a world without hope. Only God can create justice. And faith gives us the certainty that He does so.*

*The image of the Last Judgment is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope; for us it may even be the decisive image of hope. Is it not also a frightening image? I would say: it is an image that evokes responsibility, an image therefore of that fear of which St Hilary spoke when he said that all our fear has its place in love. God is justice and creates justice. This is our consolation and our hope"* (n. 44).

In this connection we must renew our understanding of Purgatory: that state in which after death we are purified and healed, for barely one of us is fit already for the beatific vision of God when we die, but we need to be *cleansed in that purifying fire* before we can have eternal communion with God. Of course we need reminding of our need to avoid those choices which keep taking us away from the love of God and His grace — we need to avoid Hell, in other words, and our reflection on our being judged one day is a good remedy for avoiding sin. And also we are reminded of that essential Christian practice of praying for the dead, that they may be solaced in their

purgatory by the prayers, almsgiving, and the Eucharist offered by the Church on earth — and in that way we practise immense hope for the faithful departed.

God calls us to be aware of our judgment after death; but at the same time He is the only one who knows our hearts perfectly, the only one who can make a sure judgment, and to set things right that maybe in the course of this life were unfair to us. So we can have perfect hope that if we do our very best to cooperate with His grace in this life then He will welcome us into His happiness in the next life. So as we take stock, this November — as we remember the various dead that are dear to us — let's promise ourselves to Christ once more: let's ask Him to keep us faithful, to keep our endurance up, keep us devoted to the Sunday Mass and to our daily prayers; and keep up our loving sacrifices for those whom we have known here on earth who have “gone before us marked with the sign of faith” and for whom we pray often. It's the mark of the Church that we are *one in Christ*: Our Lady and the saints pray for us; we here below pray for the dead; one day the

Church on earth will be praying for us too that we enter heaven. The Church (in heaven, on earth, in purgatory) is *one undivided community of faith*, a sign that humanity should all be one before God in Christ. Let us live that out today as we gather around the one altar of Jesus, and offer to God the sacrifice that Jesus once offered on the Cross, for the intended salvation of all mankind. Let's remind ourselves that as we offer this perfect sacrifice of the One who died and rose again, *He truly comes to be with us*, the Son of God, offering His perfect love to God the Father on our behalf. Filled with His living, risen, presence, we know that He, in us, can overcome all things, even death. This is the Victory He has won for us, and which can never be taken away, except by wilful, unconfessed, grave sin. This is our consolation when we are bereaved — this is the source of our everlasting joy as His Christian people.

*We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that it will be the same for those who have died in Jesus; God will bring them with Him. We can tell you this from the Lord's own teaching ... (1 Thess 4:14–15)*