

We Pray for the Dead

A sermon at Holy Eucharist on All Souls Day, 2025

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John 6:37-40

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away, for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.

All Souls Day is not a popular observance. After all, why come together to think about death and the dead when we are not obliged to do so? Our culture is so concerned with avoiding death, distancing ourselves from every mention or reminder of it, that to set a day aside for its remembrance must seem very odd indeed.

Death is frightening. Even in spite of our assurance, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that it, ultimately, has no power over us, we remember that in the midst of life we are in death. It is hard to understand. We have domesticated plants and animals, we have harnessed the wind, the water, and even what lies deep below the earth to do our will. We have mastered so much of creation and turned it to our own uses. But death remains beyond our control. It operates on its own terms, at its own times, and is answerable only to God. It is no wonder that we are so hesitant to even speak of it; fearful that using its name might attract its attention.

Our distance from death and our hesitancy to come anywhere near it means that, when it does visit, we are at a loss. Many of us no longer know how to honour the body of one who has died. How to comfort and aid one who is dying. How to be supports for each other as we mourn.

We have also forgotten how to grieve for ourselves. Like a wound to the body, grief requires time to heal. It requires care and often leaves a scar. Helping grief to heal, and learning to live with its souvenirs, requires more than a few hours' attention when it is fresh and new. We have lost our old tradition of gathering at regular intervals after losing a loved one but have managed to keep this annual remembrance. We come together, as the Church, to pray together on this day.

We pray for the dead. That they might know comfort and rest. The joy of being remembered by those who love them, even though we are separated for a time. The reassurance of what it means to be held in the sure and certain hope of resurrection in the hand of God.¹

We pray for the dying. That they may remember, even in their last breaths, that they are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.² That they may make the great journey out of this life with courage, supported in our love, guided by angels, and welcomed by the smiles of all those saints who have gone before.

We pray for each other, the living. That we might be signs of hope and comfort for one another. That we might be evidence of the great love given to us by God; love so great that it causes us to grieve when we no longer see those we care for.

All Souls Day may be unpopular, but it is so

¹Wisdom 3:1-9

²1 Peter 1:3-9

important. We are promised that we will return to the dust from which we were made and every day we see evidence of the death we long to avoid. For us, and for those who have gone on before us, what could be more important, more healing, more loving than a reminder that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day?³ Amen.

³John 6:37-40