

ALL SOULS' DAY

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Yesterday was the Feast of All Saints, honouring all those human beings who live with God in heaven in perfect happiness. Today we celebrate the Feast of All Souls. We remember and we pray for all those who have died who may need our prayers, in order to see God face to face and experience the fullness of God's love.

Each of us knows people near and dear to us who have died. There are those who were part of our family, perhaps even our mother or father, sister or brother. There are friends who are no longer with us. There are others who have touched our lives and influenced us to become better people. But today we remember not only all those people who were special to us but all the *'faithful departed'*. We offer to the God of love and mercy all who have been baptised, all who have been joined to Jesus Christ through faith and baptism. We ask God to give them complete pardon, joy, happiness, life and peace in his presence.

But what of non-Christians, of those who have never been baptised and have never known Jesus Christ? *'On this mountain,'* Isaiah assures us in our First Reading, *'the Lord ... will prepare a banquet for all peoples.'* Not just for a chosen few, then, but for all! Every living person has been created by God; every living person is unique and loved by God. Would God want to lose any of those whom God has made in his own likeness? Would God want to lose any of those for whom his Son died?

We are reminded of God's love for us in our Second Reading today when St Paul reminds us: *'what proves God's love for us is that Christ died for us ...'* In the gospel we hear Jesus himself speaking words of comfort and encouragement both for us and for all the faithful departed: *'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.'*

But why do we feel the need to pray for those who have died? If the dying and rising of Jesus has brought them everlasting life, what can our prayers achieve? To help the souls in purgatory, we say, to release them from suffering into the presence of God.

But what is purgatory? We don't know exactly. Perhaps it's a blinding flash that comes to those who have just died; a vivid awareness about just how huge is God's love for them. Perhaps in that blinding flash of insight they are also aware of their own selfishness and lack of love. Perhaps in that blinding flash of insight they turn totally to God and in the *'fire'* of God's unlimited love they are instantly purified.

The word *'purgatory'* simply means *'cleansing'*. Too often we think of it as a kind of waiting room, where God must keep us like naughty children, till we say we are sorry. We speak of *'days'* and even of *'years'* spent in a place, and of *'indulgences'* as remissions of a sentence.

Here in this life we live in a time and a place, but in God there is no time and there are no boundaries. There is only an immediate present, an everlasting now. And so our prayers offered in time, can help those who have died today, yesterday, last year, and even long ago. They can even help and sustain the dying at that time when God will be fully revealed to them.

The thief who died on the cross next to Jesus was given immediate entry into paradise. He recognised Jesus for what he was, as the human face of God. There was no talk of making up for sin, no talk of satisfying the justice of God, and certainly no talk of appeasing God's anger. There was only Jesus' offer of total forgiveness and his wonderful promise and welcome: *'This day you will be with me in paradise!'*

Dying and the moment of death may be all the purification, all the purgatory, which any person of good will needs. What loving parent would not open wide the arms of love to their child who was truly sorry for doing wrong? If the Father of the lost son could run and embrace with such tenderness and affection the prodigal coming home, surely we can trust that God will do the same for all others who turn to him with sincere sorrow in their hearts?

If we can take God at his word, if we can recognise that God never stops loving us, if we can appreciate that Jesus Christ died so that we might live, should we not somehow rethink our ideas about purgatory? Should we not leave to God how he takes and uses our prayers for the dead? Should we not make more of that marvellous truth which we declare in our Masses for the Dead: *'Lord, for*

your faithful people, life is changed, not ended, and when the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death, we gain an eternal dwelling place in heaven?'

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