

**All Souls Day 5 November 2017 6.30pm, Cathedral of St Michael & St George, Grahamstown.**  
Sermon preached by Revd Dr Claire Nye Hunter

1 Thess 4:13-18 & John 6:37-40

**Introduction**

During the first week in November, in our church liturgical calendar, we celebrate 2 significant festivals – All Saints (this morning) and All Souls (also known as “the commemoration of the faithful departed”) followed by Remembrance Sunday (next week).

During this time, we are reminded that we are part of the great multitude; the communion of saints – stretching across time and space (see Rev 7). Our prayers, whether offered privately or corporately, are caught up in the great outpouring of praise and worship of the whole community of faith on earth and in heaven.

**All Soul’s Day**

Tonight I wish to focus on just 3 aspects of All Soul’s Day.

1. We remember our loved ones

As we gather here, we come to remember with thanksgiving the lives of dear ones known to us. We hold them in our hearts and treasure our memories of them. Maybe today you are particularly mindful of your own family members who have died – your parents or grandparents, your spouse, your sibling, your child or even grandchild. Maybe you think of a special friend; someone who had a significant impact on your life; maybe a member of this Cathedral family (*pause*). We celebrate their lives today! We give thanks to God for the gift they were to us; for the privilege of sharing our life with them and for the many ways we have been enriched through knowing them.

2. We acknowledge our grief

All Soul’s Day can be quite an emotional time. Grief is a strange thing! Our loved ones may have died many years ago – yet for some of us it might feel like only yesterday. Our emotions might still be very raw. We might feel we are coping well; have come to terms with their death and moved on – then out of the blue we can be caught totally off guard and fresh emotions well up inside us. This still happens to me sometimes when I speak and think of my late father who died 24 years ago, and my mother who died 4 years ago. I can suddenly find myself struggling to speak, choking back the tears. While at my mother’s bedside a few days before she died, we spoke of my brother Francois – her 2<sup>nd</sup> child – who died at birth, and she said how much she has thought about him all these years and looks forward to meeting him in heaven. We both wept together. The journey of grief is not a straight, smooth, flat path – but is full of ups and downs, twists and turns.

When we love much, we will grieve much. The first year is often the hardest, as well as special occasions – birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, Easter. We are painfully reminded of the empty chair. They have left a gap in our lives and inevitably they are sorely missed. We find ourselves wanting to tell or show them something. When my daughters did well at school, I want to pick up the phone and tell my mother as I knew she would have been so proud of them.

Those of you who have lost a husband or wife – it may feel as if a part of you is missing. Your soul-mate and best friend is no longer by your side – and you much really struggle with loneliness and the empty feeling of not having someone who knows you intimately to share your life with you. When a parent dies, it can feel as if something in us dies as well. I still dream of my father often! As someone said to me after he died – “You don’t get over it, but you learn to live with it”.

Jesus said, *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*” (Matthew 5). There are many ways to interpret this text, but reading it in the context of All Souls’ Day I wish to suggest that here Jesus gives us permission to grieve. It is not a sign of weakness or a lack of faith. He assures us of his comforting presence. He calls us “Blessed” – not because we are hurting, but perhaps because in our vulnerability, weakness, frailty – when we are at our lowest – we are more able to recognize our need of God and our utter dependency on Him, and so are more open to experience the grace and love of God holding us and sustaining us. Jesus invites us to come to Him, just as we are, through our tears, to find comfort and solace for our broken hearts. In this way, I believe, we are blessed.

I am often reminded of the words of an old chorus : *Reach out and touch the Lord as He passes by. You’ll find He’s not too busy to hear your heart’s cry. He’s passing by this moment your needs to supply. Reach out and touch the Lord as He passes by*”.

### **3. We are reminded of our Christian faith and hope in the Resurrection**

Sometimes, I hear people say strange things in the face of death:

*There’ another flower in God’ garden*

*Another star in the sky*

*One more angel in heaven*

*Or God only takes the best...*

Where do these ideas come from? Certainly NOT from the scriptures nor the teaching of Jesus!

So what happens when we die?

Paul was asked this question (1 Cor 15) *“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?”* He goes on to explain that just as when a seed is sown into the ground and dies, and comes up out of the earth looking very different – in the same way our physical bodies that are sown perishable, mortal are raised imperishable, immortal. It is sown a natural body but raised a spiritual, heavenly body (hence many did not recognise the risen Christ). *“Listen I will tell you a mystery... We will be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye... The dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed “ (1 Cor 15:51)*. Not to become a flower in God’s garden or a star or an angel. We will still be essentially ourselves- but will be given a new, spiritual body.

What do we believe as Christians concerning life and death?

Does death have the final word? Is it the ultimate end? If so, we are to be pitied (1 Cor 15:18-19).

St Paul writes that even though we will be sad following the death of a Christian, *“we do not grieve as those who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13)*.

Why? Because, he says, *“We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in Him” (1 Thess 4:14)*.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus states, *“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn 6:40)*. What a wonderful and reassuring promise for those who believe!

There are many scriptures that affirm our conviction and belief in the resurrection – not just of Christ Jesus, but of all believers. In other words, the consistent message of the scriptures is that for Christians, for followers of Jesus, death is not the end. It does NOT have the final word. *“Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?” (1 Cor 15: 54-55)* We are given a promise of life beyond the grave, of a bodily resurrection. For everyone who *“Looks to the Son and believes in Him”* there is eternal life, everlasting life with Jesus – abundant life that starts in the PRESENT (as we put our faith and trust in Him) and continues beyond the grave into eternity. So death is like a

gateway, a door that leads from life on earth to life in heaven. The love of God that we know and experience here on earth will continue to enfold us *“For nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord – not even death” (Romans 8:37-39).*

What is more, we will be reunited with all those who have gone before us, living and dying in the Lord. We will not feel like a stranger in heaven – for we already know so many who have arrived there before us. In a moment, we shall be reading out some of their names. Isn't that an awesome prospect?! With Jesus, they will welcome and embrace us as we join the fellowship of the communion of saints! We will leave behind our Christian family and friends on earth, but will take our place in the *Great multitude that no-one can count clad in white robes gathered around the throne and the Lamb (Revelation 7).* We will join the *“great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1).* It will be like a homecoming. This is surely something not to fear but to look forward to! No wonder Paul said: *“For me to live, is Christ, but to die, is gain”!*

## **Conclusion**

So tonight, we remember with thanksgiving the lives of loved ones who have gone before us; we acknowledge our grief and come to the Lord to receive His embrace and comfort; and we rejoice in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

As we share in the Eucharistic feast, we join with the ‘angels and archangels and all the company of heaven to proclaim God’s great and glorious name, ever praising Him...’ As we partake in the sacrament of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, imagine in your mind’s eye the cloud of witnesses, including your loved ones (symbolised by the candles we shall light) gathered with us around the altar, and thank God for our unity and fellowship in Him. Amen.

SILENCE

### Instructions:

*Now we will read out the names of your loved ones. We remember them with thanksgiving.*

*As you hear the name of someone you have come to remember, I invite you to come and light a candle to represent them, and place it on the silver tray. This will be a visual reminder to us that they are present here with us, they are a part of the great multitude, the cloud of witnesses, our spiritual ancestors.*

*Once the names have been read, there will be an opportunity for any others to come forward and light a candle to remember a loved one whose name has not been called out.*

*Once this is complete, we will place the trays of lighted candles on the altar, symbolising their presence with us as we join with them around the Lord’s table, to celebrate our unity and fellowship in Christ and together proclaim the glory of God’s name.*