

All Souls Eucharist 07.11.2021

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many thanks to the Dean for the invitation to share some thoughts about the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. It is a great honour. I must say that had the Dean known how little I knew about the subject, I don't think he would have invited me. But over a long teaching career I have found that the best way to learn something is to be asked to talk about it. And for an elderly person it is a real pleasure to learn new things, especially from those who are young and bright. In the area of music I have learnt a huge amount from Kepa, Jonathan, Bayanda, Asakhe, and other talented young musicians, especially those who make up the Cathedral Consort. On the subject of All Souls, Simon Tibbs and Paul Walters have shared generously of their knowledge and insights. If this homily goes wrong, neither Dr Tibbs nor Professor Walters is to be blamed!

Over the last few weeks it's been an interesting journey for me as I have followed the journeys that others have made – in their dreams or imaginations – to Hell and Heaven, and to that intriguing place or state of being in between: Purgatory. People sometimes misuse this term, and I include myself. From time to time during my career when I came home, members of the family would ask: "How was the Faculty meeting?" And I'd reply: "It was Purgatory." (Incidentally, one of the pleasures of retirement is that I no longer attend these meetings.) But this is a wrong use of the term. "Purgatory" is not a synonym for "torture". As we shall see, it's a place or situation in which one is challenged and has the opportunity to grow. (In Faculty meetings I seldom had either of these experiences.)

Hell (or Inferno), Purgatory and Heaven (or Paradise) are the titles of the three parts of Dante's great poem, completed 700 years ago, "The Comedy", later called by Boccaccio "The Divine Comedy". This may seem a strange title, as this isn't laugh-a-minute-stuff: the subject matter is serious. But this is "comedy" in a technical sense: a story that ultimately has a happy outcome, and is written in less exalted language than tragedy. Dante's story, which ends in Paradise, has a happy outcome. And it is written, not in Latin, but in Italian, and seems to have been the first major work in this language. Interestingly, something like this also applies to the New Testament: the salvation of humankind is certainly a happy outcome, and much of it is written in Greek that is colloquial rather than formal.

Dante has a succession of three guides: the pagan Roman poet Vergil, a lady Beatrice (whom he regarded as a spiritual mentor – frustratingly, she was married to someone else) and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Dante's journey starts on Maundy

Thursday and ends the following Wednesday. Rather a lot happens in less than a week. From Jerusalem he goes to the fiery centre of the earth (Inferno), battles with and overcomes sin, and continues to the other side (the Antipodes) of the spherical earth. Purgatory is in the southern hemisphere, and it would be roughly where what is now called French Polynesia is found – not that Dante would have known that: he wouldn't even have been aware of the existence of the Pacific Ocean.

Dante's Purgatory is a mountain, the various levels of which include The Seven Deadly Sins. Amazingly, it's not as if Love is lacking here: it's more a case of Love that has been misdirected or has gone wrong. Lust, Gluttony and Greed are examples of excessive Love; Sloth is deficient Love. Wrath, Envy and Pride are vengeful Love. At the top of Mount Purgatory is the Garden of Eden, the original Paradise, and from there Dante proceeds to the orbits of the heavenly bodies that make up Paradise.

Let's move ahead 350 years or so, and briefly meet a far less educated man, but one who was just as great a genius, the Puritan John Bunyan. (I'm sure many of you know his hymn "He who would valiant be..." Do you remember that highly contrived rhyme: "dismal stories ... his strength the more is"? Still, it's a great hymn.) Bunyan lived in a Christian country (England), but was imprisoned for being a bit too religious. The problem was that he was holding services outside the structures of the Church of England. It was mostly from prison that he wrote (to give the full title) "The Pilgrim's Progress from this world to that which is to come." The protagonist (Christian) proceeds from the City of Destruction (i.e. this world) to the Celestial City, which is set on Mount Zion. There is no specific Purgatory, but there is a series of challenges which are overcome.

Let's move to more recent times: the period of World War 2. When C S Lewis wrote his splendid little novel "The Great Divorce", he was in part reacting to a work by William Blake (a brilliant poet and artist) in the late 1700s: "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell". Blake was deeply religious, but also distrustful of formalised Christianity. In this work he (provocatively?) presents Heaven and Hell as necessary "contraries" to each other – one might say two sides of the same coin. C S Lewis recognises the genius of Blake, but re-affirms the separateness of Heaven and Hell – hence the title "The Great Divorce".

Lewis draws on the thinking of great predecessors. As with the first part of "The Pilgrim's Progress", his story is the account of a dream. Like Dante, he has a guide – George Macdonald, an author and minister – for at least some of his time in what seems to be Purgatory, although he doesn't use this term.

The narrator comes from a “grey town” where it’s always raining. This **sounds** suspiciously like “Grahamstown”, the previous name of Makhanda, although most of us would be happy if it rained a bit more than it does. Is the “grey town” Hell or Purgatory? It is Hell if you stay or go back there. The narrator and some others get onto a bus, which soon becomes airborne. The sky clears and the bus comes down in a beautiful landscape, with the foothills of heaven in view. As the passengers get out of the bus, they find the environment physically painful: everything is hard, but they are unsubstantial. The spirits offer the newly arrived ghosts opportunities to change. Sadly, most do not, because they are afraid of change.

Incredible changes are possible in terms of time and space. One wonders if the thinking of Einstein influenced Lewis. Sorrows from the past are not merely cancelled, but transformed into joy. Although the “grey town” is very large, it turns out to be inside a tiny crack in the surface of the new place. The point is that Hell – i.e. returning to where we’ve come from – is minute compared with Heaven.

Wonderful stuff from Dante, Bunyan and Lewis! But surely this is just fantasy? Maybe, but the best fantasy – beneath all the weirdness that is set before our inquisitive imaginations – is really all about truth.

Lots of people would argue that there can’t be much theological relevance, as so much of this material is not found in the Bible, which for example makes no mention of Purgatory. But there are valid practices and beliefs held by many Christians, which are not specifically biblical. Infant baptism is one. But that could be justified as consistent with the spirit (if not quite the letter) of scripture, especially if those baptised later confirm the vows taken on their behalf. The doctrine of the Trinity is not spelt out in the New Testament, although I think John’s Gospel goes 99% of the way there.

Is there such a place or state of being as Purgatory? Here are some imagined responses:

Catholic: Yes, it’s part of a tradition of nearly 1000 years, and it’s been carefully thought out by theologians.

Protestant: No, it’s not in the Bible.

Anglican: Ja – Nee. Let’s work towards a compromise on this.

In the end such differences may not matter. What is noteworthy is a degree of similarity between three people from very different backgrounds. Two of them (Bunyan and Lewis) seem to connect Hell with where you are. Dante’s Hell is a fiery place, but I’m sure that his picture is an allegory for how people actually are on earth. In all three there is a strong focus on the exciting possibilities for positive

change, even after one has left this life. In different ways this theme is reflected in our readings.

In the Isaiah passage (Is. 25.6-9) the Lord brings exciting changes, all of which are for the good. This happens on a mountain, which so often in the Bible is where God makes his presence known. The notion of Purgatory as a mountain may be an expression of this.

The Gospel passage (Jn. 5. 24-29) talks about "judgement". Of course judgement could go against one, but the emphasis here is very much on the exciting prospects that life after death holds. This will come to those who "believe" in the one who has sent Jesus. The word translated as "believe" is far-reaching: it includes faith, trust, commitment and putting all of that into action.

We've come together this evening to pray for the Souls of the Faithful Departed. Here too there is no instruction in the New Testament to do so. But we need not be constrained, and knowledge of the context of scripture maybe helpful. A likely reason for this apparent omission from the New Testament is that the assumption is often made there that the second coming of Jesus will be very soon. This is reflected (for example) in our reading from Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4. 13-18). So there is no compelling reason to pray for those who have died. What, however, does come out strongly in the New Testament is the idea that together we are the Body of Christ – whatever our race, gender, age, or whether we are dead or alive. That makes a celebration such as this entirely appropriate.

Let us remember the dead with solemnity, gratitude, tenderness, and not forgetting laughter over their endearing eccentricities. And may we include Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who composed most of the mass setting that we have been using this evening? It is a great irony that the composer should die while in the process of composing a requiem. The last part that he wrote was the beginning of the "Lacrimosa", the deeply sorrowful piece that will be sung while the candles are being lit. At this stage 35-year-old Mozart knew that his life was nearly over. This piece and the rest of the Mass were completed by Süssmayr. The "Sanctus", "Benedictus" and "Agnus Dei" are by Süssmayr. The music of what will be sung during Communion (the "Communio" and Fugue) is once again Mozart's: almost the same as that of the Introduction and Kyrie, but slightly adapted to accommodate different words. The work ends – as did the Kyrie – with a bare chord that is neither major nor minor: neither happy nor sad. The emotional possibilities are kept open.

This is the work of Mozart and Süssmayr, but an earlier composer is also present. The opening theme of the Kyrie Fugue (repeated at the end) comes from Handel's "The Messiah". This is not just a coincidence. Mozart knew the work well from

having re-orchestrated it. Nor is it plagiarism – more a tribute to a great forerunner. In Mozart's Requiem we have a sense of a Communion of Composers' Souls. And if, as we consider the music of this evening's service, we include the exquisite setting of Psalm 23 by Christopher Cockburn, the Communion of Composers takes in the living as well as the dead.

I'll end by saying a prayer which includes all people, the living and the dead, and makes no assumptions about people's faith, or even whether they have a religious faith.

Let us pray:

O God of infinite mercy and justice, you have made human beings in your own image and hate nothing that you have made, we rejoice in your love for all creation, and commend all people to you, the living and the dead, that in us your will may be done, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen