

All Souls service

Revelation 21:1-7

One of the saddest things I see in life is when people begin to lose their memories. When they can't remember the names or even recognise those closest to them; when they can't remember where they live, when they can't remember what they were doing this morning. Usually it's the recent memories that go, leaving the distant ones intact. But without the recent memories, the ones from deeper in the past are no longer part of the present and there is a disconnect with the current reality. For some of you that was no doubt the reality for the one you mourn today.

Our memories are the things that anchor us in our lives. They give us a place in both space and time; they identify who we are and where we belong. They map out our life's history and point us towards the future. Memories, of course, live on even when those we remember are no longer with us – as I am sure you are all too well aware of.

Memories bring joy and happiness, but they also can also bring sadness and regret and sometimes its hard to handle the emotions they stir up, indeed sometimes its hard to control the memories at all.

Today you have come here to remember. It isn't easy. Because the remembering you are doing today is remembering someone you loved who is no longer with you. And you're probably not certain how you will react this afternoon. I am sure that it is an act of courage that you have come here today. Not quite knowing what to expect – or how the service might affect you.

This afternoon may bring pain and sorrow, but I hope also it will bring some kind of happiness and joy as you remember.

In this short service, this short act of remembering, names will be read out. Each name represents a person, an individual – a person special and dear to someone or some people here. And of course, the reading of the names will bring fresh memories of those loved ones to mind.

Today as we read the names we will be given the opportunity to light candles for those we remember

Why candles? Why does lighting a candle for someone help us at these times?

The large Easter candle that we will light during the next hymn is the one we lit last Easter Sunday at dawn as we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. A candle, a light, because Jesus describes himself as the Light of the World – able to bring light to dark situations; able to guide us through the despair; and able to help bring us to the place where we can see a future again.

And we light candles for our loved ones today in the hope that they live on in the presence and light of God because of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. In the hope that their lights continue to shine; continue to light up our lives even though they are no longer physically with us.

As well as allowing us to remember, as well as us lighting candles, I hope that coming here today will be a helpful part of the grieving process for you.

We hear a lot of the grieving process which, as a process takes time - and which is unique to each of us.

And there are two comments that you may well have heard about this process from people over these past months. Two things which I am sure are meant in a helpful and supportive way, but that it can be hard to receive in that way.

They are “I know how you feel” and “it will get better”

They are meant I am sure to be positive, to affirm and to build up. And sometimes they may help.

But they probably aren't true.

I cannot turn to you in your grief and sadness and say “I know how you feel”.

My Mum died last December. Her name will be read out later this afternoon, as the names of your loved ones will be. I know how I feel. Actually even that isn't necessarily true. Sometimes – when a piece of music reminds me of her,

or when something I see or do brings her to mind – my feelings change instantly from coping to sadness and grief. So I don't always know how I feel. So how can I possibly know how you feel?

I have an inkling as to how my Dad feels – but I don't know what its really like to be separated from the one you have been married to for 65 years and have loved and been almost inseparable from for close on 70 years. How can I?

No-one can now how you feel. Your feelings are yours. For someone else to claim them denies that.

And the other comment you may sometimes hear about the grieving process is *it will get better*.

Well, no it won't necessarily. It will get to be different. It will not always be like it is now. The rawness will slowly go; the intensity of the pain may well lessen. But for each of us that change will be different – in both its effect and its timescale.

There will always be some kind of hole. Some kind of absence. The feelings of absence will certainly change over time, but they won't go away. So lets not try to kid ourselves or give ourselves false hope. We **will** learn to live with those feelings, and life can and should be good again. But in a different way. Different but still good. But not necessarily better.

So how can we live with the pain and the sadness, with the memories and possibly the regrets. How can life become good again; how can we allow ourselves to laugh and smile?

The Bible reading today comes from the book at the very end of the Bible. It's a book we may not often look at; its one of the less easily read books in the Bible. It's the book of Revelation - a vision that St John had of heaven; of what it means to be in the presence of God.

And the reading contains some wonderful words which I hope will encourage you and help you

The home of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them –

- God, the creator of the universe is concerned with us and wants to make his home with us and live alongside us. We are important to him. None of us is too small; none of our achievements too little for him to be with us. Because he loves us. For who we are, not for what we do.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes; death will be no more; mourning and crying will be no more, for the first things have passed away. See I am making all things new

- This God who loves us is starting something new and better. In this new thing there will be no suffering, no pain, no death and no crying. God himself will wipe away the tears.

To the thirsty I will give water from the spring of the water of life. I will be their God and they will be my children.

- A promise that God will love us like a loving father or mother; it will be like we are in his close family; he will give us all the things we need for life. We will hunger and thirst no more.

And why these words are so encouraging is that they point beyond the limits of this world; they point beyond our grief and sadness and loss; they point to an eternal future.

And that is the essence of the Christian hope. Our loved ones, we trust, are now in the presence of God; living alongside him; drinking from the springs of eternal life; their tears being wiped away from their eyes. Loved without limit by the God of the universe.

But that's not all God promises. He also promises to be alongside us in this world. He doesn't promise to take the pain away; he never promises a life free from suffering or sorrow; but he does promise to be with us and alongside us. And remember, he's a God who because of the life and death of Jesus knows all about suffering and pain.

There is a verse from the Old Testament – from Deuteronomy – one of the early books of the Bible – which is one of my personal favourite verses. It reads “the eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms”. It can be read as the eternal God is your home, or a safe place. It's a verse that reassures me that whatever I may have to face; whatever the sadness or the

pain; whatever the joy or the happiness, God will be there alongside me and underneath me. His arms outstretched to embrace me, to protect me or to catch me if I fall.

So today as we recall our loved ones; as their names are read out and as we light candles for them, as we remember happy times from the past and as those memories may stir up present sadnesses and move us to shed tears, let us seek to remember two things

There is a future beyond this world and it is far better than anything we know here. There is an eternal dimension to life; free from pain and death; released from tears and sadness. This world is not everything.

And

that, even in our darkest moments, God promises to be alongside us, wherever we are, whatever we do and however we feel. Always there to support us, protect us and save us. God is not just concerned about the eternal – he is also aware of where you are, how you feel and what you think – and he wants to be close to you in it and through it.