

Those who have died are with us as witnesses and givers of hope

Sermon by Andy Wurm, All Saints' Day service, 4th November 2018

The first parish I was parish priest for was Jamestown, in the mid-north of South Australia. One of the first people I met was Adrian, who owned a nursery on the edge of Caltowie, half way between Jamestown and Gladstone. One of my favourite stories about Adrian concerns the day when a bloke in Caltowie reported to his wife seeing a pig in their backyard. As he had been drinking, his wife thought he was imagining it, but it was later discovered to be true, because Adrian had a pig, which he was fattening up for Christmas dinner, and it had escaped and wandered into Caltowie, so it really was in that bloke's back yard.

The reason I tell that story is because it's about a real person and today, as we celebrate All Saints' Day, I want to affirm that we are celebrating real people, or people in our own time, not just people from long ago.

This past week the church has celebrated All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, and much of what they each represent overlaps, so I'm combining something from each today.

The celebration of All Saints involves remembering saints. We remember the 'great ones', but also the not so great ones. And we aren't just talking about people who have died either. In the New Testament, the term saints refers to *all Christians*. And if we want to be really inclusive, we can include people who were not or are not Christian, but live their lives according to the pattern of Jesus. In that I would include well-known people like Gandhi, for example, but also unknowns, such as Adrian of Caltowie. When Adrian died some years ago, there would have been much sadness throughout the tobacco and alcohol industries, for Adrian was one of their greatest supporters. He was also very fond of calling upon the name of Jesus, but not for religious purposes. However, Adrian spent his entire life, in whatever enterprise he was involved in, doing things for others and being generous. So, for me, he is one of the saints.

When someone dies, is that it? Is Adrian now only a memory? And when we celebrate the life of someone like that, are we just looking at the past? In the Christian view, there is much more than that. When speaking of saints and all who have died, when we use words such as *celebrate* and *remember*, we don't mean what those words mean in everyday use. In the secular world, to celebrate the life of someone who has died means to appreciate what they *were* and *what they achieved*. To remember them is simply to recall *thoughts* about them.

To get the Christian perspective on this, we have to look at the beliefs behind All Souls' Day. All Souls' Day is a day of remembering those who have died. At the heart of it lies the belief in the communion of saints, which is our companionship with those who have died, united in God, and so of course, the nature of the communion of saints then is determined by the nature of God.

The resurrection of Jesus is described in the New Testament as the first instance of God's plan to resurrect the whole creation. It's also described as a 'New Heaven and New Earth', so we're talking about *everything* being refashioned into something new. And of course, God's inclusivity is not limited to human beings, so it really is everything: living and non-living. In a way that I cannot comprehend then, Adrian's pig will be in heaven too. The detail of what that means or how, is not

what matters. What matters is that everything and everyone will eventually come together as one, within the life of God. And if it is so, that in God, only what is good can exist, then all shall be shaped by love. That means that there is no place for enmity or division. It also means that the tension between individuality and connectedness will be reconciled. In other words, we shall be our perfected individual selves, but only in unity with others.

Anyway, back to remembering those who have died. In the Christian faith, the meaning of *remembering* is to do with bringing together into one (to re-member). Remembering those who have died then, doesn't mean calling their past to mind, but acknowledging their *connection with us* now. It means becoming aware that they remain joined with us, through God. In that way, they are 'present' with us. That's why in places where people have been killed for standing up for the poor, as part of their worship, Christians have called out their names in remembrance, with the congregation responding 'present'. They are present, because they now live within God, who is always with us, so whenever we are close to God we are close to them.

For this reason, some people pray to those who have died, or ask them to pray for us. This is not because they are closer to God than us, but that connecting to one, connects us to them all. It's about going deeper into our connectedness.

There is something else about the presence of those who have died, and it's obvious really. It is that they are *not present as we are*, i.e. in an 'earthly sense'. We have to keep this in mind when we open ourselves to their presence. To do so is not to 'bring them down to earth', but to open ourselves to their reality, which exceeds what we can comprehend and are capable of experiencing in this earthly life.

The difficulty that presents for us can be seen in the resurrection stories of the New Testament. How could Jesus' disciples experience within time and space, the presence of a person who has *transcended* time and space? It was only possible therefore, for Jesus' disciples to experience his presence in a *limited* sense, even though, he was actually more present to them than ever. Similarly, those who have died, are present with us now more fully than ever before, but we can only experience that to a limited degree. We are bound by the limitations of our mortal, earthly existence. Connecting with the communion of saints then, is not about them coming to us (they are already 'here'), but about us entering more deeply into their presence.

We can only experience their presence in a mystical sense then. However, doing so provides a sense of hope, that we, and all creation, will one day be raised to that renewed life. If so, then the chaos, dysfunction, evil and suffering of this world, will one day be resurrected by God and transformed into good. And all the good that we do, and all our loving, will be our gift to that new life. It will become part of God's life for eternity.

Remembering those who have died then, takes us beyond our present and connects us deeper with all other people, and in fact all creation, now, in the past and the future. Among other things, that should influence how we live in regard to our natural environment and plants and animals, giving the creatures we share life with a special significance, that surpasses their value as being only

resources for our use. Hence, in our Eucharistic prayer we affirm that we worship God, with angels, archangels, and *the whole company of heaven*. It means we join with all the living and non-living as companions in one giant relationship together, with God.

Those who have died are witnesses for us, in that they are examples for us, fellow companions who have tried to live as fully as they could. They show us, inspire us and encourage us, not only with their great achievements, but also how they have coped with failure and suffering. We recall all that, but also, knowing they now live in the presence of God, and therefore us too, they hold before us the eternal significance of what we are and what we do. It means that our striving for love and justice here and now is part of something much greater, and we are not alone in our efforts.

What I do here and now is connected with what Adrian of Caltowie did and was, in the past, and yet in an eternal sense, also now. None of you are able to know him as I did, and yet, he is one of billions and billions, who through our bond with God, is present now with us as a companion, in the communion of saints.