

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

Sung Requiem Mass on the commemoration of All Souls

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Friday 2nd November 2018 at 1.05pm

My parish book group is reading a remarkable book, 'Do no harm' by the neurosurgeon Henry Marsh – the phrase of the title often associated with the Hippocratic Oath that doctors take; although it seems not actually within it. The book is a canter through a career in brain surgery and – apart from forays into criticism of the present day medical establishment – largely deals with matters of anxiety, risk, success, failure, disability, forgiveness and death. Unsurprisingly many of the anecdotes, and the clinical decisions which they relate, turn on the quality of life upon which dangerous treatments are predicated. Complicated moral decisions which grip society are also deeply personal stories which are determined on detail and circumstance.

Curiously the only patient that the neurosurgeon seems to have known with a faith that might assist interpretation was his own mother, herself a refugee from Nazi Germany – and so a notable survivor. In fact there must have been scores of his patients who themselves, or whose next of kin must have had faith with which to describe and navigate death. While our surgeon may have ignored it that might seem to be our task today.

It is a given in this book, as in other texts that most people, most of the time, do not think about their own deaths. I once met an Anglican of fairly extreme evangelical hue, who professed that he didn't care for this service, 'the Communion' in his words, because he didn't like to think of Jesus dead. I think we can do better than that and the historic setting up of images of the dead Christ (and indeed this observance today) indicate a determination to be realistic and yet deeply pastoral.

Those of us who are older might be thought to be more fluent both for internal conversation and public discourse; my own experience of bereavement grows and my greater proximity to death is evidenced in meditation upon retirement, greater exertion in standing up, expostulating about the state of the Church and shouting at poor diction or grammar on the wireless. I am, as it were navigating between a world I am losing and contemplating a world without me. I recall a line of Michael Maine, a distinguished priest, in his own meditation on death, 'Why is it that we, who love sleep so much, are so frightened of dying'.

This year's November commemorations are coloured by the hundredth anniversary of the Armistice. Apart from solemn remembrance of those who laid down their lives (or more likely had them taken from them), we are reminded that that generation, had experienced multiple bereavements and many forays with death in a way foreign to most of us. In the face of something so searing we have perhaps little right to dwell upon our own fragility. I wonder if ordinarily people dwell overmuch on their legacy; enough to be remembered for a while and perhaps best of all with laughter.

But All Souls is not just about the courage with which we face death or even the impact upon those who are left behind, but also about the destiny of those who are caught up in the life of Jesus the Christ, for that is the determining part of our character, although seldom

mentioned at funerals or memorial liturgies. My baptism will be surely more use to me than my sense of humour, my knowledge of sherry or the class of my degree.

The question, 'Have you been saved?' may not be much asked by evangelicals these days; the anxiety used to be currency amongst some students a generation ago. It may even be wondered if 'salvation' is much of an ingredient in religious consciousness. I have witnessed Christian funeral rites in which there has been no petition at all for mercy upon the soul of the departed and much concentration upon that person's gifts and eccentricities.

There may be some reasons for this shift. Mortality has been postponed and perhaps obscured. Most now die in old age and rarely conscious. The desire for salvation has been temporized by the liberal consensus which seeks to offer all fulfilment now and for that reason alone is very nervous about a convincing vision hereafter. And just as psychology is suspicious of the opposition of flesh and spirit (hence reducing people's spiritual ambition) so the idea of individual salvation has been demoted.

If All Saints is the guarantor of our common legacy, All Souls is the promise of personal destiny; and of course of those to whom we remain attached in memory and affection. The shape of our own remembered and felt grief in a commemoration of this character, is more than sentiment - it helps us to prepare for our own end; and real faith in God, I should say might cause us to be reasonably agnostic about the shape of what ultimately lies before us. And yet if God has shared with us everything; his image, his creativity, an astonishing world and the vision to contemplate the universe, a conscience and the love of goodness, and above all his Son, his grace – can we not surmise that he will not keep from us his eternity, as the ultimate proof of his acceptance – and that we will discover that with Him nothing is wasted.