



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

Remembering the Dead

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 30, 2022

All Souls' Day

Based on Wisdom 3:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; John 5:24-27

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

Today we're playing with the liturgical calendar just a little bit in a desire to offer the congregation an opportunity to consider All Souls' Day: The Commemoration of All Faithful Departed. As the Episcopal Church's *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* explains it:

In the New Testament, the word "saints" is used to describe the entire membership of the Christian community; and in the collect for All Saints' Day (which we celebrate next week), the word "elect" is used in a similar sense. From very early times, however, the word "saint" came to be applied primarily to persons of heroic sanctity, whose deeds were recalled with gratitude by later generations.

Beginning in the tenth century, it became customary to set aside another day—as a sort of extension of All Saints—on which the Church remembered that vast body of the faithful who, though no less members of the company of the redeemed, are unknown to the wider fellowship of the Church. It was also a day for particular remembrance of family members and friends.

Though the observance of the day was abolished at the Reformation because of abuses connected with Masses for the Dead, a renewed understanding of its meaning has led to a widespread acceptance of this commemoration among Anglicans, and to its inclusion as an optional observance in the calendar of the Episcopal Church.ⁱ

The Day of the Dead (*El Día de los Muertos*)—which is related to All Souls—"is a primarily Mexican celebration, where families welcome back the souls of their deceased relatives for a brief reunion that includes food, drink, and celebration. A blend of Mesoamerican ritual, European religion, and Spanish culture, the holiday is celebrated each year from October 31-November 2nd.

On the Day of the Dead, it's believed the border between the spirit-world and the real-world dissolves. During this brief period, the souls of the dead awaken and return to the living world to feast, drink, dance, and play music with their loved ones. In turn, the living family members treat the deceased as honored guests in their celebrations, and leave the deceased's picture or favorite foods and other offerings at gravesites or on the *ofrendas* built in their home."ⁱⁱ

What's interesting to me is how closely these customs parallel the early Christian practice of going to the graves of those who had died and bringing a meal to share with them. The connection of this practice to the Eucharistic feast is unmistakable. We're told that food was shared with the dead and that some of the

very first Christian churches were constructed over the graves of those Christians “who had gone on before.” Most famously, St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome was built over the grave of the Apostle Peter, and tradition says the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Spain was built over the grave of St. James, and the Basilica of San Thome in India was built to enshrine the remains of the patron saint of most Episcopalians, St. Thomas, i.e., “doubting Thomas.” These, along with countless other smaller churches, have the dead literally resting beneath the altar upon which the eucharistic feast is served.

New Testament scholar Graydon Snyder, of blessed memory, once told me, “The tradition of a meal shared together with family and friends following a funeral is, in many ways, the closest meal we now have to the Eucharist.” It is, after all, a meal that bridges the chasm between the living and the dead and highlights the immortality of those who have become Christian. It reminds us all of our connections to one another, even after death, and of the bond we share for all eternity. How can you measure the gifts of those who are now dead, in your own life and journey? What did they mean to you? How did they change and form you?

We are mesmerized by death—even as we fear it and dismiss it. Our culture is practically schizophrenic on the subject. On the one hand, we fixate on ghosts, and spirits, and communicating with the dead through mediums and mystics; and, on the other hand, we deny death completely and consider it a topic not to be discussed in polite company.

We go to extraordinary lengths to ensure we do not look our age, and we’re quick to dismiss any notion that we are mortal and that one day we, too, will die. When a young woman was given a terminal diagnosis by her heart-broken doctor, she is said to have placed her hand on his shoulder as she said, “My dear doctor, we are *all* terminal patients.”

Yet, medical science has advanced so rapidly, some have begun to believe that death is as unlikely as it is unnatural. I can assure you, it is neither. We can begin to think we have control over everything when, in truth, we have control over next to nothing. As they say in the African-American church, “God is large and in charge!”

The ancients weren’t nearly so confused when it came to death. The *Wisdom of Solomon* holds words we find comforting nearly two thousand years after they were written. We still make use of them in funeral and memorial services today.

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment will ever touch them.
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,
and their departure was thought to be a disaster,
and their going from us to be their destruction;
but they are at peace.

These are words of promise and comfort. They offer consolation to those who have lost a loved one, especially those who have watched a loved one suffer before they died. These words speak of the blessed state of the righteousness in death. Affliction, suffering, and early death may seem to us a divine punishment, but after death, those who have died are forever safe and at peace. Our God promises their immortality is assured. After discipline and testing, God vindicates the righteous and lets them share in his rule over all the people, and even more importantly, gives them an understanding of God’s ways. In death, we become closer and closer to God and farther and farther away from our fears.

My friend Brother Geoffrey Tristram, former Superior of the Society of St. John The Evangelist, observed,

“Today we say we are celebrating All Souls’ Day, but how can we celebrate, when shortly we shall be remembering by name before God our loved ones who have died?”ⁱⁱⁱ (And it’s a long list, too, so be prepared to spend a few moments as we all contemplate our mortality. Apparently, none of us are getting out of this world alive!)

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” In *The Book of Common Prayer*, we find this prayer in the *Rite I Burial Office*: “Give courage and faith to those who are bereaved, that they may have strength to meet the days ahead in the comfort of a reasonable and holy hope, in the joyful expectation of eternal life with those they love.” And we hold such a hope—a holy and reasonable hope—in sharing eternal life with those whom we love. And we hold it with an uncommon tenacity.

Brother Geoffrey says, “On (All Souls’ Day) we celebrate what lies at the very heart of our faith as Christians. Jesus truly died, and yet he was raised to life by God. And all who have faith in Jesus, although we, too, will die, will also be raised to life by God.”^{iv} Now to proclaim something as bold as that on Park Avenue in the middle of the City of New York in the year 2022 is quite a radical statement, wouldn’t you agree? But if you’ve ever lost someone you love, don’t you need to be reminded of this truth? Don’t we need to be reminded? Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” They will Live. Live!

Brother Geoffrey goes on to note, “There’s a remarkable passage in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* which describes this extraordinary communion with the dead. It may be something you understand personally: ‘And what the dead had no speech for, when living, they can tell you, being dead. The communication of the dead is tongued with fire, beyond the language of the living.’”

He adds, “St. Augustine knew what the communion was about. When he lost his beloved mother, Monica, he writes in his *Confessions*, ‘God forbid that in a higher state of existence she should cease to think of me, she who loved me more than words can tell.’” Geoffrey says, “These beautiful lines from Augustine, for me, express what we are doing when we pray for the dead. We are not making petitions to try to get someone out of purgatory, or into heaven. We are carrying on the true work of intercession, which is quite different.”^v

Today we proclaim that death does not—nor cannot—destroy the love that binds us together in a communion that transcends time and space and being. It is, ultimately, the unbreakable bond of love which lifts us above time and space and being and into the very life of God himself. In our prayers for the dead, and in our Eucharist this morning, the past is connected to the present as we celebrate again, for the umpteenth-zillionth time, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are brought through Christ’s love into the very presence of God and into the presence of those we love: the communion of the saints and the whole company of heaven.

Amen.

©2022 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

ⁱ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, 1997, Church Publishing Corporation, c. 1998

ⁱⁱ History Channel website, [Day of the Dead \(Día de los Muertos\)](#), October 11, 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Brother Geoffrey Tristram, [All Soul’s Day](#), The Society of Saint John the Evangelist, November 4, 2003

^{iv} Ibid

^v Ibid