

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
All Souls Day Service ~ Thursday November 2, 2017

I am undoubtedly showing my age when I say that one of my favourite comedians is the actress Joyce Grenfell – not just because she was very funny but because she also had a profoundly spiritual side to her nature. One short piece she wrote was this. You might be familiar with it:

“If I should go before the rest of you
Break not a flower nor inscribe a stone,
Nor when I’m gone speak in a Sunday voice.
But be the usual selves that I have known.

Weep if you must, Parting is hell, but life goes on, so sing as well”.

I guess those words might sum up how many of us are feeling this evening. There will be very mixed emotions amongst us all here. We are all different and everyone here will be at a different stage of grief after the death of those we have loved, whenever it was and in whatever circumstances it happened. Thankfulness, relief, bitterness, anger, numbness, acceptance, resolve – these feelings and more will be swirling around this evening. But I hope you will regard this Church as a safe place in which you can feel whatever you feel.

But I suppose if I want to try to say anything this evening, it is to encourage us all to do two things. Firstly, to remember the past – the real past – and to try to say thank you, even if we may not feel particularly thankful. Human life is full of mixed emotions and we have to remember the good and the not so good that is the kaleidoscope of any person’s life. When I visit a family to help plan the funeral arrangements, I often remind them that we are giving thanks for a real human being – not a saint – and so it is important to be realistic, to try to capture the real

personality of the person who has died – to remember the good and the not so good, to remember the things that made us love them as well as the things which infuriated us. So remember the real past.

Secondly, I want to encourage us all to try to look ahead – not too far but just a day or two – and begin to believe that tomorrow and the one after that are new days which lie open and ready to be filled. Life without someone we love will never be the same again – but they would probably not want us to feel that our life has died because they have died.

One of the most unknown members of the Royal Family died a few years ago at the age of 102. Princess Alice of Gloucester, the Aunt of the Queen, privileged in life though she undoubtedly was, had her own share of tragedy, not least in the sudden death of her eldest son, Prince William of Gloucester, in a flying accident at the age of 30. Speaking years later she said ‘I began to come to terms with my loss when I told myself that it was better to have known and lost him than not to have known him at all’.

Remembering the real and trying to look ahead are in the verses – both weep and sing – because parting is hell and that hell may not easily be filled by anyone or anything - but life does move on, albeit in a very different way and it is up to us, to a large extent, how we fill it.

In all this, for those who try to cling to Christian beliefs, there is an awareness of being led by God – the God who saw his Son suffer and die on a Cross. Of course, often when we are faced with the death of someone we love, we can feel that God is far away, that he has deserted us. Yet strangely enough, many people who suffer the death of a loved one can also begin to feel that they are given the strength to carry on, to become far stronger than they thought possible.

Maybe after tonight, after you have lit a candle and said Amen to the prayers – you may be able to walk out of the Church door feeling just that bit stronger to face tomorrow, having said, through your sadness and grief ‘thank you for what was’.