

All Souls 2007
Diocesan Requiem at the Cathedral
Sermon by Bishop Paul V. Marshall

This week we are in another of those moments of reversal that shape spirituality in the northern hemisphere. In the spring we experience the reversal of dark and light in Easter Vigil as leaves poke through the quickening earth. Now in mid-autumn with leaves dropping from trees we go from light to dark as All Saints Day is immediately followed by All Souls Day. Soon we will need Christmas.

After the clamor of All Saints' Day yesterday, we find ourselves quiet, and the church becomes a kind of womb for us in a worship service where we are largely silent in the way that a fetus is quiet—silent but developing. After boisterously thrashing about to “For All the Saints” yesterday, now we participate in liturgy internally as our hearts absorb and join the praises, laments, and petitions that the choir and instruments bring to life in the air around us. Our liturgical pace is unrushed, and we allow the words and notes to penetrate and change us. Perhaps Nicodemus was on to something with his ironic question about whether an old man had to return to the womb to be saved: it is precisely as we age that we most need an ability to be carried like a fragile new life.

From the dazzling white of the All Saints liturgy and its celebration of all that God has done through the faithful who have *gone before us*, we come today to the black of the requiem, where we remember that they have indeed *gone from us* and joined the great procession of lives returning to their source. All Saints and All Souls days are two sides of one very thin coin.

There is but one fundamental truth for Christians: in Christ we are tied to God and each other in a way that the circumstances of time and space cannot defeat. But that great truth has to be constantly broken down into its smaller component mysteries, and several of them are before us tonight.

One of the mysteries we encounter in this liturgy is the necessary and reciprocal relationship between love and loss. There is a price to being loved, a price to rejoicing in deep connection. The price is feeling wounded when that connection is broken. Tonight we come to God aware of the many broken connections that each of us endures precisely to the extent that we have received the gifts that relationship to another gives us. Blessed are those who mourn, for they have had something to lose. Blessed are those who dare to risk loss—only they can possibly know love.

When we pray for “those whom we love but see no more,” we are entering another mystery, the ability to love what is not physically present. That ability is the essence of spirituality. Each of us had to learn early on to endure the absence of our mothers by learning to hold a mental image of mother in our minds until we were with her again, and by learning to believe that she loved us even when we couldn't see her. As adults gathered in a very interior kind of prayer tonight, the image we hold in our corporate awareness is the image of those who have gone before us. On the simplest level, they are

gone but they remain, because knowing them shaped our very personalities. More profoundly, they are gone but they remain in unbroken relationship to us through the eternal love of God, a realization that is a balm to our sense of loss.

As the great Thanksgiving of the eucharist begins a bit later, we will say, “For to thy faithful people, Lord, life is changed, not ended.” Remembering thankfully that it is of the transformation rather than the termination of life that we have to deal with has a result. The result is that the image of those we have loved comes warmly into our awareness as we give thanks for how they were God’s gift to us. Over time our sense of loss is often or at least occasionally overcome by the image of their being cared for by the loving God into whose hands we entrust them, the loving God in whom we all will someday be together, because we already are together.

The final mystery that occurs to me is a bit of a challenge, because it is the mystery of our own death. We ourselves are part of the great procession back to the source of our life. In fact, if each of us did not die, our species could not progress. The psalmist prayed, “Lord, teach me to number my days and to know that my life has a destination.” Each of us is on the train, as Lala Leach described her own dying not too many hours ago. One day we will be the ones remembered at a liturgy very like this one; we will be the ones being held in the minds and hearts of those slightly behind us in the grand procession toward the heart of God. Because the communion of saints cuts across time and space we realize tonight that we already are being held by those still to be born.

So, then, here we realize that because all life in Christ is essentially one, to engage in prayer for the dead in the words and music of this liturgy is to gently heal our past...and calmly embrace our future.