

ADDRESS Remembering Service 30 October 2022

Revelation to St John the Divine [7.9-17]
 Psalm 103. 13-17, 19
 John [3.14-17]

Because of my age, and because my friends are passing over to the other side, one by one, I've been planning my own funeral while I still can.

If my wishes are carried out, it will begin with an old Methodist hymn, by Charles Wesley

*Rejoice for a brother deceased,
 Our loss is his infinite gain;
 A soul out of prison released,
 And freed from its bodily pain!*

Sung to a strong, positive tune.

As we remember family and friends who have died, we may need to separate their glory from our grief – and we can do this, in God's strength, day by day,. We need to learn to live without those we have loved; to move on from our grief.

We need to rejoice that they are with God, freed from the prison of a failing body, and perhaps a failing mind as well; they are enjoying a new life with the saints in heaven, wherever and whatever heaven is. We have been left behind.

Anyone who tries to tell us what heaven is like is generally lost for words, as St John was in the passage Michael read to us.

St John's vision was in terms of his own culture and the historical situation. He was lamenting the men and women and children being tortured and killed in the great ordeal of the persecution of Christians during the reign of the emperor Diocletian.

But his vision of glory does not refer only to the martyrs of his time but to all those who embrace Christ as their king during this life, and who continue to honour him and worship the Father in the next. The people whom we remember today, and whose personal relationship with God is now known only to God.

Contrast John's rejoicing with the hopelessness in the passage from the psalm we read. This was written centuries before Christ demonstrated that a new life awaits us after death:

*we flourish like a flower of the field.
When the wind goes over it, it is gone,
and its place shall know it no more.*

If this life were all there is, as most Jews believed, human beings would have no more value than the wildflowers or the weeds. They might be remembered for one generation, but then become little more than a name on a forgotten memorial in a cemetery or a crematorium garden.

But, thanks be to God, as the Gospel reminds us, *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

We all have our own precious memories. If we are fortunate, they are so vivid that our loved ones live on in our minds. Today I am remembering my grandmother, who loved me when my parents could not. Almost every school holidays I would endure the trial of a 13-hour overnight sit-up train trip to Melbourne, including the awful early morning change of train across a freezing platform at Albury, to spend those weeks with her.

I became her companion. We would go swimming together, she had the use of one of those colourful beach cabins on Brighton Beach; she would take me with her when she went to play 500 with a friend, and, most exciting of all, she would let me push the pennies into the top of the gas meter so we could have dinner together at night.

So my funeral plans include being buried beside her in the Cheltenham Pioneers cemetery in Melbourne. With her beside me, and the love of God surrounding me, all will be well.

So let us not keep grieving for loved ones who have passed away, but keep remembering the good times we shared in this earthly life, and rejoice that they have passed over to a new life, a better life, an eternal life, in the presence of the ever-living God. We can remember and rejoice without fully understanding the mystery.