

Mass for the Italian Community

November 1 2010

Carissimi fratelli e sorelle

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We meet on the evening of the commemoration of All Saints and on the eve of the commemoration of All Souls. There is an obvious connection between these two feasts since in both cases we are thinking of those who have gone before us, who have left us behind, as it were, in that procession of human life which from the beginning, in the eternal plan of God, was intended to people his heavenly kingdom.

Our vocation is to know, love and serve God and to be happy with Him forever in heaven. That is the catechism answer, one of the first in the catechism which those of my generation may well remember learning in childhood.

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the Church in dynamic terms, as a community of people on the move: "The Church, like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the cross and death of the Lord until He comes." (Lumen Gentium 1)

While physically we may tire on that journey as we grow older, our steps growing slower and our minds finding greater difficulty in recalling events, especially those nearer at hand, it is one of the great consolations of growing older that memories of long ago seem to grow stronger with the passing of the years, and in doing so bring us comfort when we are no longer as agile or as comely as we once were.

But whereas that physical aspect sees in some senses a limiting or deterioration of our powers, in other respects we can grow stronger – stronger in our faith, in our hope, in our love. We can become holier, more focussed on the real things that matter in life, starting of course, from our relationship with God, but extending to all our relationships, especially family relationships. How lovely it is to see the bonds of affection which unite grandparents to their grandchildren.

We can also grow in wisdom with the passing years, enriched by the words of sages, whether from the sacred readings of the bible or from the poets such as those we will be happy to quote in those plinths which we are erecting in the Cathedral's Italian cloister garden, to remind us of the victims of war and of our own deceased *parenti*.

Perhaps most significant and beautiful of all the words which will be carried in that cloister garden are those of the Divine Poet, Dante Alighieri, ..." E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace: ell'è quell mare, al qual tutto si move." – In His will is our peace: that sea to which everything flows."

How lovely to imagine those words, permanently recalled in the shadow of the Cathedral. I should let you know that work on the Cathedral and garden will be complete at the end of March and I hope we will meet again in the springtime to open that great monument which you, as a community, have helped in no small measure to come to fruition.

Of course the words of our Blessed Lord are of a different order and constitute perhaps the most famous sayings of all time. And among the most loved are what are called the beatitudes. They are so-called from their traditional introductory words in Latin (and Italian!) – "beati" – blessed are the poor in spirit, the gentle, and so on.

Our modern translation uses the word "Happy" – "happy the poor in spirit, happy the gentle," and while perhaps we might be sorry to miss the old terminology at least we have to acknowledge that the blessed are those who are happy, and those who are happy are blessed.

Jesus has promised us blessed happiness. He has promised us life. "I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly..." The fullness of that life, says St John, is in the knowledge of God and of His son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

As we heard in the first reading of tonight's Mass: "Think of the love that the Father has lavished upon us by letting us be called God's children, and that is what we are".

And yet we do not know much more than the fact that we will be blessed if we go to God in the company of Jesus. Our imaginations have not been fed on the experience of those who have gone before us, as in so many other areas of life where what we have received from our elders a knowledge which enables us to understand better and to have a certain empathy with people and places.

Yet St John does give us a clue, when he says: "What we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is that when it is revealed we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He really is."

What is significant to me is that in looking at the readings for the Feast of All Saints, we find them among those which can be used also for the commemoration of All Souls. While the difference may be that we can pray to the saints and seek their intercession before God, we pray for those who have gone before us, that they may reach their heavenly destination;

though there may be many instances when we are so sure of the goodness of those we remember tonight that we can also ask them to pray for us and with us.

In all of this I think the Church, as a loving mother, shows that tenderness which lifts our sadness. For if we thought that only those who were canonised by the Church could be considered to be surely redeemed, then we would not have that feeling of peace which we do tonight as the Church presents us with the commemoration of all the faithful departed.

What she is saying to us ... think also of all the others, all your relatives and friends who have lived their lives in fidelity to Christ, though they may have fallen at times. By His grace they were able to pick themselves up and at the end went to God, as we say, "fortified with the rites of Holy Church" – in other words those sacraments which assure us of our union with God - the anointing of the sick and viaticum, Holy Communion at the end.

Cardinal Newman who was recently beatified in Birmingham by Pope Benedict expressed these thoughts very beautifully in a great poem – the Dream of Gerontius - put to music by one of England's most outstanding composers, Edward Elgar. We are familiar with some of the hymns of that great Oratorio, but here are some less familiar words which, spoken by his guardian angel to a soul at the end of life's journey.

On an evening like this, I hope they can add to our devotion and our sense that all is well for those we love in God's plan.

Angels, to whom the willing task is given,
 Shall tend, and nurse, and lull thee, as thou
 liest;
And masses on the earth, and prayers in heaven,
 Shall aid thee at the Throne of the Most
 Highest.

Farewell, but not for ever! brother dear,
 Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;
Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
 And I will come and wake thee on the morrow.
(Dream of Gerontius)