**Sermon All Soul’s Day 4th Nov 2018 Free Church, St Ives**

I have been thinking about death lately, having recently conducted two funerals: one before half term here and one at Fenstanton when I got back from our week off. And this month we are remembering the 100 years since the end of the first world war with a silhouette of a soldier in our porch chapel.

Today we are celebrating the Christian festivals All Saints and All Souls on November 1st and 2nd in which we honour the great legacy of wisdom our ancestors have left to us and continue to offer. Some Christians denominations celebrate and honour the dead for the whole month of November.

In the Northern hemisphere the world is entering the dark half of the year. The ancient Celtic people believed this time was a thin space, where heaven and earth whispered to one another across a luminous veil, and they thought that those who walked before us were especially accessible in these late autumn days. The turning of the year in autumn offers us an opportunity to pause and reflect on our spiritual journeys and where they fit in the gospel story, the story of God’s salvation history.

One way to do this is to remember deceased loved ones and honour the Creator who loved them into life and received them in death. All Souls Day reminds us that the veil between this life and the next is at times quite thin. We **don’t know** what effect our prayers have on those who have died or whether they in turn pray for us. Our Catholic friends believe that prayers for their loved ones who have died may bring greater light to their journeys and that the prayers and energies of deceased friends and family may support them on their earthly pilgrimages.

As those who have Reformed theology, I wonder if we may have lost something of this awareness of our connection with those who have gone before us, and those who come after us, when we got rid of indulgences – that was the church asking for money from family members to pray for the souls of their dead relatives. It was an abuse of position and authority. Yet were the prayers completely invalid? Prayer is a mystery and we do not really know how it works – we know that it is making ourselves open to God’s presence and if our loved ones are in God’s presence can they see and hear us? I know that I have occasionally spoken to my Mum and my late first husband, not knowing whether they could hear me. Yet Hebrews 12.1 says, ‘*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us… looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.’*

The truth is that all of us are on a spiritual journey and we know that we do not reach perfection before death, but it says in the Scriptures that God will heal and transform all creation. This suggests that all people will eventually find wholeness in God's presence even beyond this lifetime. Paul in our reading today describes Jesus as the second Adam, saying that just as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. So, this means that death does not end the human journey – we know that those who believe, even though they die, will live. If that is the case, then we are not static beings in the afterlife but continue to experience personal and relational change and growth. The God who seeks our wholeness in this lifetime continues the process of making us more like Christ beyond the grave.

Over the years, of conducting umpteen funerals many grieving people have asked me where their loved one is now, particularly if they died unexpectedly and did not know if they were believers. I have often wondered that myself after the death of my loved ones. I learned that they are in God's hands. God's love for them did not end at the moment of death. Romans 8.38,39 says ‘*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor things present, nor things to come nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’* Death does not limit God's care. God’s love continues in another dimension drawing us from isolation to community, from brokenness to healing, from sorrow to consolation, and from sin to grace. I believe that even those who appear to run away from God in this lifetime will eventually meet the ever-loving, ever-pursuing God.

We as reformed theologians do not believe in purgatory, a place where people are tormented and disciplined until they conform to Christ, but perhaps there is some way in which we continue to grow in wisdom and stature. We forgive and are forgiven. We experience the healing of memories and relationships and continue to explore paths not yet taken in companionship with God. I know I have some things I want to say to loved ones that I never had a chance to before they died. I do think there will be tears and smiles and hugs when we meet again. Being a saint, or a follower of Christ, is living a life of adventure and growth, freely and creatively responding to the grace that leads us toward wholeness. Doesn’t it make sense that this continues in the afterlife?

All Saints’ and All Souls' Days are an opportunity to give thanks for those imperfect but loving persons who have shaped our lives. This year, I give thanks for the love of my parents, grandparents, first husband, and Ric, Peter’s son and many others whose love has supported my life journey. Christians believe that death does not sever our connections with loved ones. Whatever is loved lives on forever not only in our hearts but in God's healing memory and everlasting care.

For me, honouring the Communion of Saints means recognizing that lives lived before us matter. It means remembering that there is ancient wisdom we can learn from previous generations of those who dealt with the joys and struggles of life. We can learn from those who have confronted the great mystery of being across time.

How might you give honour to those ancestors who have travelled this road before you and welcome the wisdom they have to offer you for your life now?

One idea is to think of your ancestors and loved ones who have gone before you as we celebrate Holy Communion this morning as it says in the sanctus: ‘Therefore with all your people in heaven and on earth we sing the triumphant hymn of your glory…’ Spend some time opening your heart to the wisdom they offer across the ripples of time and remembering that they are present with you and we are all in the presence of Christ our Lord. AMEN.