

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	03 November 2025
Service:	Eucharist, All Souls' Day
Preacher:	The Venerable Dr Tom Carpenter, Archdeacon of Chichester

No one forced the builders of this Cathedral to say why they built it. Today, the deans and chapters of cathedrals must have a strategy to show what they are up to, they must give a list of reasons why their cathedrals are there, but Bishop Luffa did not have to explain himself to grant-making bodies, or, rather, the literal grant making bodies did not need it explaining to them. What would they have said if they did? What would its builders have said this cathedral was put here for?

We can be sure that near the top of their list they would have put what we are here for tonight, praying for the dead. By the 1540s, there were twenty-two chantry priests whose job it was to celebrate the Eucharist for dead Christians, twenty-four of whom had masses said for them every day of the year. Seventy-seven others on the day they died. Prayer for the dead was as big in the medieval cathedral as visitors are in ours.

In 1547 it stopped, and the Act of Parliament that stopped it began by explaining why

Considering the great part of superstition and errors in Christian religion hath been brought into the minds and estimations of men, by reason of ignorance of their very true and perfect salvation in Jesus Christ, and by devising and fantasizing vain opinions of Purgatory and Masses satisfactory to be done for the departed.

It was all, parliament said, a mistake. All the requiem masses the chantries paid for, all the altars consecrated for them to be offered, all the priests ordained to go up to them, all an error, all because our founders were 'ignorant of their true and perfect salvation in Jesus Christ.'

Were they? Were those who gave so much time and money and skill to the Church's intercession for the departed truly ignorant of the true meaning of Jesus death and resurrection?

I'm not sure they were, yet I think we might be. Anglicans have formed again the habit of praying for our dead brothers and sisters in the last century, but we do so in that infuriating way the English have of never thinking anything through. Our obligations to them are really not much more than remembrance. In hundreds of churches at this moment great long lists of the dead are being recited to no real Christian purpose.

We are here to pray for them, remembrance is just the initial fixing of our minds on them. If we stop there, we are, as our predecessors were not, ignorant of our salvation. What does it mean to pray for the dead? It means that there must be something they are lacking. To intercede for someone is to ask God to do what is best for them. If every Christian soul, without exception, or delay finds themselves in heaven after death, then there is no point praying for them. No point, because there is nothing more God can give them. They already have all that a person can receive before the return of Christ, and the reunion of their souls with their bodies. Prayer for those to whom God can give no more is pointless.

The very act of praying for the dead assumes that there is more for God to give them, that they have not yet received everything. Unless this is true, then why are we praying for them? Our prayers assume a state in which the souls of departed Christians live outside heaven. That state is purgatory, through which Christians who die in anything short of utter holiness, utter guiltlessness, pass. And here, I fear, I've lost any of you who were still trotting along with me. Purgatory after all is the limit. Jesus talked of complete conversion, of heaven and hell. He did not tell us about anything in the middle.

Yet, purgatory is not in the middle. It is not a room which we enter when we die, and in which we wait while God decides what to do with us. No, it is our final preparation for heaven. And what is heaven? It is the vision of God. That is what heaven is, just as twenty two men kicking a ball about on a pitch is what a football match is. Heaven is the vision of God. There, we will see him, and there we will see everything as he sees it.

To see God is an act for which only the pure in heart are fit. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Unless there is a state after death where sins that do not amount to a decisive rejection of Jesus are paid for, then one of two things must be true. Either only those who die in a state of perfect purity of heart are saved, or heaven is less than the vision of God, which can only be enjoyed by them. If only those who die perfectly pure can enter heaven, then what hope is there for those who die suddenly, spiritually unprepared, caught

up in the venial sins that are the background radiation of the world? Either they are lost, or the vision of God to which their baptism pointed them is an illusion.

But, and this is the joyful truth of purgatory, God is not a God of compromise. He will not give to those who belong to him less than the full-fat vision of him, in heaven, for eternity. That vision that only the pure in heart can enjoy. He is not a God of compromise. But he doesn't slam the gates of that heaven in faces in which there is the slightest trace of his Son's. He gives us purgatory where everything about us that makes us unready for the vision of God is burnt off.

And I say burnt for a reason. None of us can doubt that there is suffering there. Suffering at the distance from their destination their sins have left them; suffering for the sins themselves. This is why it is an act of love to pray for souls that may, for all we know, find themselves there. Those who destroyed prayer for the dead in the sixteenth century did so claiming that the money set aside for it would be better spent on charity. But it already was being spent on charity, for what could be less selfish than to sacrifice our time to pray for those who may need it. And, the Church assures us, it does them good. It helps them for the same reason that prayer helps those who live. Because God has chosen some things to happen in answer to prayer, to increase our sense of dependence on him. He chooses to help through purgatory those for whom we pray.

Why he does, who can know? But surely we can see that praying for the dead, far from coming from ignorance of our salvation, comes instead from knowing what God has done for us in baptism. If my prayers for the departed remind me every day that the Church crosses the barrier of physical death, that the life that I and they received in the font is real and for ever, am I not more likely to act like it. To act in a way that is fitting for those for whom Jesus died? By reminding us to pray for the dead, is not Christ through his Church preparing us for heaven just as he is preparing those for whom we pray.