

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'

A sermon for All Saints by Mark Pilgrim

One of last week's episodes of the Radio 4 series 'Living with the Gods' began in an arresting way. Neil MacGregor, the programme's presenter, has the same slightly pinched diction as Prince Charles. The opening words, though, would have sounded odd coming from Charles. They were

'I am sitting in a room with 6 people and 2 of them are dead!'

This particular 'Living with the Gods' episode focused on the way different societies relate to their dead. MacGregor was sitting in a room with four interviewees and two mummies. He invited listeners to be aware that the way our society relates to the dead – those who have died both recently and some time ago – is very specific and might be thought sadly lacking in depth and respect by other cultures. Other countries including both Catholic Mexico and Shinto Japan see large proportions of the population remembering their recently and not so recently departed family members in annual festivals that involve rituals, sometimes powerfully and joyously accompanied with special food and drink.

The programme got me reflecting on the relative disregard for remembering the dead that we go in for in mainstream western culture. True – we will honour the victims of war in next weekend's Remembrance activities. But how we remember our own family members is generally a very private rather than publicly shared affair: and people from other cultures looking at us may wonder whether we did any mourning or regular remembering at all.

As it happens, the way in which we celebrate the passing of old and the coming of new generations has been prominent in my life recently. My family has experienced the death of my mother-in-law and the birth of our second grandson in a matter of weeks. And anyone who has been to St Peter's recently and listened to or read our Notices will

be aware that a good number of regular attenders are experiencing bereavement through the loss of family and friends.

This series of celebratory funeral and memorial services has had an impact on me. For the first time ever, I gladly sat down last week to record some suggestions for my own 'final service'. Rather than my loved ones starting with a blank sheet, guessing what bible readings, hymns, music and poetry might best reflect my faith and take on life, I have put them down on a sheet of paper. To avoid doubt and ambiguity about what has been and remains most important for me – and what I therefore hope you might take forward into the future – here it is: these compositions reflect my priorities. Now I must remember and have the courage to tell my family I have done it – and where the sheet of paper is!

Whereas some Eastern cultures have explicit and very domestic annual rituals to remember and honour previous generations, it has occurred to me that perhaps the only honour we accord to our forebears comes in the naming of our children. I find myself chuffed at the way my daughter and son-in-law, having given their son Arthur the second name Robert after Tom's brother who died at the age of 12, have given their week-old son Rufus the second name of Mark – which is both my and our son Felix's second name too. And have you noticed that we tend to accord respect and memory to some antecedents by giving our children the names of our great-grandparent's generation? So, the popular names of my grandparents' generation born around the turn of the 20th century which my generation would never have dreamed of using – 'Iris, George, Mabel, Wilfred' – suddenly become all the rage...safe and attractive. Whether or not the same pattern continues for names like Brooklyn, Romeo, Apple and Beyoncé's Blue-Ivy...I will never know!

Amid this frequently dislocating and painful experience of the death of loved ones and the transition from one generation to another, Christianity has some very specific to say.

It says: 'God is with us – wherever we are – all the time'. It says: 'God knows and loves your loved ones and seeks to enfold them in love beyond life as they are ready and able to accept that love'. It says, as we read this morning, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'. It's easy to say but it's perhaps less easy to know what it means. What is 'blessed' about mourning? Surely 'Wretched' is a more apt description than 'blessed': what can possibly be good about losing dear family and friends? And the experience of mourning: that's a complicated affair. We naturally and obviously link mourning to death – but there are many experiences of loss which produce mourning in us, sometimes taking us by surprise and creeping up unexpectedly. Mourning can follow, among other things, the loss of capacity, the loss of health, the loss of employment, a change in housing, a change in role. How can these experiences of loss and bereavement all around us be occasions and opportunities for God to bless us?

And then: what kind of 'comfort' stems from that blessing? Is it the kind of comfort we see portrayed in Western advertising – in which comfort is all about luxury, soft furnishing and pampered attention? Surely the comfort God offers those who mourn is completely different from this cultural model.

Let's take the last question first. A rule of thumb I recommend to myself and others is that, as soon as you hear the word 'comfort' in church, look to its root meaning. Realise that 'comfort' is made up of two Latin words: 'cum' meaning 'with' and 'fort' meaning 'strength'. To 'comfort' someone, therefore, at root, is not to soften them but to strengthen them. And the strengthening that God offers is the strength of the presence of the Holy Spirit. So 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' means 'God, through his Spirit, will strengthen those who experience loss now'. A theologian whose work I admire, David Lose, offers this arresting image: While we might hope

and expect God's blessing to immunise us from pain and suffering (how comfortable that would be!), God's blessing is not a flu jab. God's blessing, being in a place of grace with God, bestows no immunity from suffering at all: just look at the life and death of Jesus and all the witnesses and martyrs to him through the ages to realise the truth of this. No: far from being a flu jab and granting immunity from pain, God's blessing in fact equips and leads us to struggle – to further struggle, as we turn to God asking for and receiving strength – the strength of the Holy Spirit – to take us on into the next phase of our life (or death) in and with God.

How come struggle is part of the divine life which God offers? Why isn't life with God in Christ a bed of roses? Wouldn't life be a whole lot better and easier if it was? This is a subject we touched on in our second session of our series looking at the Creed. A paradox lying at the heart of Christianity's description of God as Almighty – so 'all powerful', 'omnipotent' – is that God needs and does limit himself, in love and as Love, not to force his power on creation and human being. Rather, God gives us huge amounts of time and space to respond freely to that Love with loving responses – both to God and to our neighbour, as Darius reminded us so effectively last week – of our own. A legitimate way to describe this dynamic at the heart of God's nature is to say: 'Think about it: God struggles with human free will. So maybe our struggle with bereavement and loss of all kinds is a direct reflection of and participation in the struggling nature and capacity of God'.

Which brings us to our final issue: what is it, in God's economy, to be blessed? A former Director of Christian Aid, Charles Elliot, wrote a commentary on the Beatitudes whose central theme I have never forgotten. He said: 'Tempting as it is to translate 'Blessed' as 'Happy' (and many people he noted seem content to do this) replacing Blessed with Happy is a travesty. Saying 'Happy are those who mourn, happy are the peacemakers, happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' ignores and disrespects their experience and reality. He

suggests a better translation is 'You are in the right place when'. So 'Blessed' becomes 'You are in the right place when' you mourn, 'You are in the right place when' are peacemakers, 'You are in the right place when' are persecuted for righteousness etc – for then God's strengthening Spirit, God's grace and God's power will be available to you **in the midst of your troubles**. I wonder how many of us, recently or in times past, have known God's blessing...have known that, even in the difficulties and pain of mourning, we are 'in the right place' because of the comfort, strength and grace being mediated to us by God both directly from God and through the kindness and support of others.

In a few minutes, at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, we shall say together words which are taken directly from our first reading. Revelation 7.12 is familiar to us in these words: 'Blessing and honour and glory and power be yours for ever and ever. Amen.' These words remind us that blessing is two way. The angels and elect accord God blessing and thanks because of God's love and grace. But the blessing human beings accord God is no more than the palest reflection of all the blessing or blessedness that God invests in us.

As we say these words and prepare to receive the bread and wine of communion, let us pray that we will be in the right place to hear God whisper to us not only this All Saints festival but for the rest of our lives the words which David Lose, the theologian I mentioned earlier, offers as a summary of all these reflections: 'Blessed are those who struggle, for God is with and for them'. May God's blessing strengthen us in all our experiences of bereavement, loss and struggle. Amen.