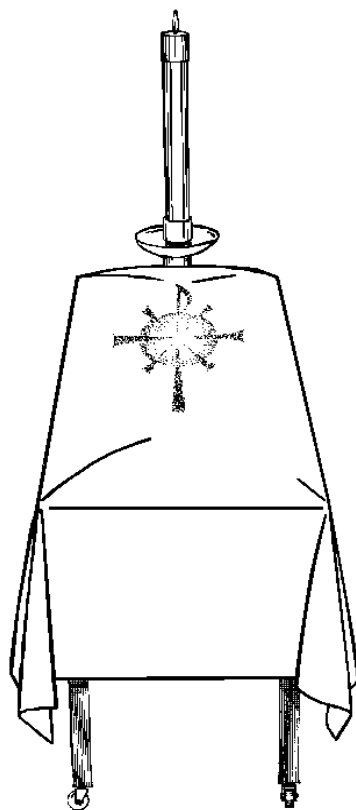


# EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

*No. 3*



## PRAYING FOR THE DEPARTED

## INTRODUCTION

"Mummy, what happens when someone dies?"

Not an easy question to answer--especially when it has been brought on by the loss of a family member or close friend. To many, there is no answer. Death is the great unknown, the destroyer, the invincible foe whose untimely appearance, for many, signals only the cessation of life. In the Bible we read that the answer to the mystery of death is found through the life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and One of the Holy Trinity. Through His birth, life, death, and resurrection, death itself has been vanquished and the power of the grave overthrown. Death has been "swallowed up in victory" (*1 Corinthians 15:54*), says Saint Paul. The joy of eternal life is offered to those who live in Him. All Christians agree on this central facet of the Faith. Yet there are many differing opinions concerning the nature of life beyond the veil. Though Christians do not look upon death with the same sense of hopelessness and dread as do "those who have no hope" (*1 Thessalonians 4:13*), there are still many questions that arise. We know that in Christ, death is not invincible.

But death can still appear as a powerful and fearful enemy whose presence is surrounded by mystery and the unknown. Christians may ask: What happens when a believer dies? Does his or her spirit go immediately to heaven? Are the souls of the dead conscious? Are they actively involved in what is going on around them, or do they remain asleep until the day of resurrection? Do our departed friends and loved ones in Christ remember us? Are they aware of what is taking place here on earth? Are they still involved somehow in our day-to-day lives? Do the saints of old – those who lived especially holy lives dedicated to the service of God – still play an active role in the Church today? Is it possible to ask them to pray for us and to intercede on our behalf?

## WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE BIBLE?

*Does the soul, once it has left the body at the moment of physical death, remain conscious and aware of what is going on around it? When we turn to the Scriptures, the fact of continued awareness of the soul after death is repeatedly borne out. Take, for instance, Hebrews 12:22-24: "But () you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where millions of angels have gathered for the festival, with the whole church of the first-born children, enrolled as citizens of heaven. You have come to God himself, the supreme Judge, and to the Spirits of the upright who have been made perfect; and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the purifying blood which pleads more insistently than Abel's."*

The words italicised in this passage refer to those God-loving souls who have passed from this life to be with Christ in the next. They are part of the Church in heaven (what is sometimes called the '*Church Triumphant*'), living consciously with Christ, though still awaiting His Second Coming, when they will be clothed with their glorified bodies at the resurrection of the dead. Surely this passage would not say that in the Church's worship we are in the presence of angels, God the Father, Jesus, and "the spirits of just men made perfect" if these spirits were somehow inactive and unaware! The Hebrews passage is not in isolation. We find many other indications in Scripture that the spirits of those who have died are very much alert and aware of what is taking place both in heaven and on earth. Consider, for example, the following:

- In Luke 20:37, 38 Jesus says: "But even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him."
- The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (*Luke 16:19-31*), in which Jesus relates the conversation of Abraham, in Paradise, with the deceased rich man whose soul has descended into Hades.
- Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (*Luke 23:43*).
- The Book of Revelation, which shows us the saints in heaven, before the Great Tribulation, being very active indeed, falling on their faces in worship before the throne of God, casting their crowns to the King of Glory, singing His praises, and speaking to Him (*Revelation 4:4, 10, 11; 5:8-10, 13; 6:9-11; 7:9-12*).
- The personal testimony of Saint Paul. When he wrote to the Philippians, Saint Paul expressed faith that he would be alive with Christ after his death: "For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you" (*Philippians 1:23, 24*). He wrote to the Corinthians very similarly: "We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord" (*2 Corinthians 5:8*).
- The Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration (*Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36*) demonstrate clearly that the faithful departed continue to live, by the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus there.

Hebrews 12:1 says, "With so many witnesses in a great cloud around us, we too, then, should throw off everything that weighs us down and the sin that clings to us so closely." These "witnesses", including the Old Testament heroes of faith, are the saints from all ages, both known and unknown, canonized and un-canonized.

Certainly they would not have been called "witnesses" if they were not considered to be alive and active.

## ANGLICANS AND PRAYER FOR THE DEPARTED

At one time it was thought un-Anglican to pray for the departed: those who have died do not need our prayers as they are either with God or not and our prayers are, therefore, in vain. However since the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. Catholic Revival in the Church of England it has become far more acceptable to remember before God those who have gone before us, to pray for them by name and to offer Masses for them. The turning point was the Solemn Requiem for Queen Victoria. The Mass was sung in the Church of St. Matthew, Westminster, on February 5, 1901, and was attended by an overflowing congregation. The secular press was mystified, regarding the whole thing as exotic and superstitious. Religious papers reflected, in no measured terms, the varied hues of their beliefs and prejudices. The *Church Times* concluded its description by noting that a "general opinion was expressed that this beautiful and well-ordered service, with all its Catholic accessories, might well be followed in great churches on great occasions for requiems."

One of the most enlightened articles appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, which began by stating that: '[m]uch has been said and written this [sic] last few days about the beautiful music which accompanied Queen Victoria's progress to the tomb. Yet in the minds of many of her late Majesty's subjects there was something lacking. Such of them as were acquainted with the more ancient usages of the Church, and more particularly with her music, must have regretted that the tender, moving strains to which the nameless musician of some early century had set the "Requiem Aeternam" had not been sung at the Queen's funeral. The omission was yesterday supplied in the service which was sung at the Church of St. Matthew, almost under the shadow of the Palace of Westminster.'

The Anglican theologian, the Rev. Prof. J.R. Porter writes: "The great seventeenth century Anglican divines who defended praying for the departed always clearly divorced it from any particular view of the state of those who have gone from earthly life. They rested their case on the two great doctrines of the Creed, ... the Communion of Saints and the Resurrection of the Dead."

As Bp. Jeremy Taylor wrote: "By the practice (of prayer for the dead) the Church of England declares her faith in the Resurrection of the Dead and her interest in the Communion of Saints, and that the Saints departed are a portion of the Catholic Church, parts and members of the Body of Christ."

Quite simply, we believe that the dead live on and that we may still have

fellowship with them for they are still members of the Church, the Body of Christ: they are part of what has been called '*The Church Expectant*'.

Intercessions for those whom we know and love in this world create a bond between them and us, a bond that is particularly Christian. When we pray for someone we think of them, remember them, and instinctively bring them and their needs before God in prayer. That bond is not broken when our friends and loved ones have passed through the gate of death, and prayer is the Church's authorized means for our fellowship with the departed. We, with them, must still await the end times, eagerly waiting, in St. Paul's words, in hope of the redemption of our humanity (*Roms. 8: 18ff*)

We do not know, and we do not need to know, the precise conditions of the afterlife. We believe only that the departed are in the hand of God, as they were in their earthly life. And we continue to pray for them as we have prayed for them in their earthly life, that God will supply whatever they may need and that they may grow in grace as they respond to His will for them.

## **HELPFUL TRADITIONS**

This bond of love, of course, is not broken by death, which is why we should show respect for the departed. Some still ask that their body should be brought into church on the night before their funeral when *Vespers of the Dead* can be celebrated. Certainly, all Anglicans should make sure that, in their Will, they make it clear that they wish their Funeral to take place in church within the context of the Requiem Mass. (And we should make sure we have made our Will). At the time of death it is customary to ask for a priest to be present to offer prayers for the departing soul or, if that is not possible, for the family/friends, to offer such prayers. It is appropriate for Masses to be offered on the day of death, at the funeral and thirty days later and this can be arranged with your parish priest.

If we are aware of a funeral procession we should always stop and make the sign of the cross as the hearse passes. At a funeral we can share in sprinkling the coffin with Holy Water and near the Anniversary of a loved one we can always try to be present at the monthly Requiem Mass, or arrange for a special Mass to be offered.

The concern which the Church has for those who have departed in Christ flows from the all-encompassing, never-ending love which she has for all her members those still alive on this earth, and those who have preceded us into the world beyond. The major *Commemoration of All Souls*, which occurs each year on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, allows us to remember before God *all* who have died, especially members of our congregations, our relatives and friends, by name. All Anglicans should try to be present at Mass on this day so that we can remember our union

with the departed in the mystical Body of Christ who binds together the living and departed in his loving embrace.

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Go forth upon your journey from this world, O Christian soul;  
in the name of God the Father who created you. *Amen.*

In the name of Jesus Christ who suffered for you. *Amen.*

In the name of the Holy Spirit who strengthens you. *Amen.*

In communion with the blessed Virgin Mary, Saint N,  
and with all the blessed saints; with the angels and all the heavenly host. *Amen.*

May your portion this day be in peace  
and your dwelling in the city of God. *Amen.*

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**We seem to give them back to thee, O God, who gavest them to us.**

**Yet as thou didst not lose them in giving,  
so do we not lose them by their return.**

**Not as the world giveth, givest thou, O Lover of souls.**

**What thou givest, thou takest not away;  
for what is thine is ours also if we are thine.**

**And life is eternal and love is immortal,  
and death is only an horizon, and an horizon is nothing,  
save the limit of our sight.**

**Lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further;  
cleansing our eyes that we may see more clearly;  
draw us closer to thyself that we may know ourselves to be nearer to our  
loved ones who are with thee.**

**And while thou dost prepare a place for us,  
prepare us also for that happy place,  
that where thou art we may be also for evermore.**

*(Fr. Bede Jarrett OP)*