

A Sermon  
Preached  
in the Chapel  
of  
ALL SOULS COLLEGE  
by  
Fitzroy Morrissey  
on  
Sunday, 5 November 2023

According to Izaak Walton's *Life of Richard Hooker*, that great 16th-century theologian, whose life the Church of England commemorated this Friday, 'was only twice absent from the chapel prayers' in his four years as a student at Corpus Christi College, Oxford.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, I cannot claim anything like Hooker's attendance record in my six years at All Souls. But, infrequent chapelgoer as I was, I tried at least to be mindful of both of the College's charitable purposes — prayer as well as study — and did occasionally darken these hallowed doors.

From Wednesday evening prayer in the College chapel, two prayers, which I believe must be especially beloved by the Chaplain, stick in the memory. The first is the prayer for 'the quick and the dead' written by another eminent early-modern Anglican churchman, Lancelot Andrewes:

'Thou which art Lord at once of the living and of the dead;  
Whose are we whom the present world yet holdeth in the flesh  
Whose are they withal whom, unclothed of the body, the world to come hath  
even now received:

Give to the living mercy and grace  
to the dead rest and light perpetual;  
give to the Church truth and peace,  
and to us sinners penitence and pardon.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Izaak Walton, *Izaak Walton's Lives of Johnne Donne, Henry Wooton, Richard Hooker and George Herbert*, with an introduction by Henry Morley (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1888), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Prayer and the Departed: A Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine* (London: S.P.C.K., 1971), p. 74.

The second prayer is the commendatory prayer attributed to the 13th-century Oxford scholar and Archbishop of Canterbury St Edmund of Abingdon:

‘Into thy hands, O Father and Lord  
We commend our souls and our bodies  
Our children and homes, friends,  
servants, neighbours and kindred,  
our benefactors and dear departed,  
and all who need thy pity and protection:  
light us with Thy Holy Grace,  
and suffer us never to be separated from Thee,  
O Lord in Trinity, God everlasting.’

A notable feature of both prayers is that each includes a supplication for the dead. Since we are gathered here today to mark the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed — otherwise known as All Souls Day, which fell on Thursday — and since we have just offered our prayers for the souls of the departed, it seems worthwhile to linger on the question of prayer for the dead, and to consider what commemoration might mean for us to today.

Anglican attitudes towards prayer for the dead can best be described as ambivalent. The 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* includes this petition for the departed:

‘We commend unto thy mercy (O Lord) all other thy servants, which are departed hence from us with the sign of faith, and now do rest in the sleep of peace: Grant unto them, we beseech thee, thy mercy, and everlasting peace; and that, at the day of the general Resurrection, we and all they which be of the Mystical Body of thy Son, may altogether be set on his right hand, and hear that his most joyful voice.’<sup>3</sup>

Cranmer omitted this prayer, however, from the 1552 Prayer Book, which revised the liturgy in a more Protestant direction. The English Reformers were troubled, first, by the association between prayer for the dead and the medieval doctrine of purgatory, and, second, by the implication that a person’s salvation was not determined by faith in Christ alone, but dependent on the prayers of others. Nor, as the 1563 *Book of Homilies* observed, could any secure warrant be found for the practice in scripture.<sup>4</sup> For John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury under Elizabeth I and patron of Richard Hooker, prayer for the dead was ‘mere superstitious, and utterly without warrant of God’s word’.<sup>5</sup> Such an attitude contributed to the Church of England’s suspicion of All Souls Day, which in the medieval church had been a day of prayer for those souls believed to be in purgatory.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the 1662 Prayer Book makes no provision for marking All Souls, which the Reformers also regarded as superfluous given that — according to their biblical understanding of

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<sup>3</sup> *The Book of common prayer, 1549: commonly called the First book of Edward VI: to which is added the Ordinal of 1549, and the Order of Holy Communion, 1549*, with an introduction by Morgan Dix (New York: Church Kalendar Press, 1881), p. 217.

<sup>4</sup> See *Prayer and the Departed*, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-3.

<sup>6</sup> For the pre-Reformation history of All Souls Day, see Peregrine Horden, ‘The origins of All Souls Day and its significance for Henry Chichele’, a sermon preached in the Chapel of All Souls College on Sunday, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1999.

sainthood — *all* Christian souls are commemorated on All Saints Day the day before.<sup>7</sup>

That said, there have always been prominent Anglicans who looked with tolerance on — and themselves practised — prayer for the dead. In a sermon preached at Whitehall in March 1621, John Donne asserted, on the basis of the prayer for the Burial of the Dead in the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, that ‘according to the doctrine, and practice of our church, we do pray for the dead; for the militant church upon earth, and the triumphant church in heaven, and the whole Catholic church in heaven, and earth’.<sup>8</sup> For Donne, however, Christians ought to pray not for the release of the souls of the departed from purgatory, but for the hastening of the resurrection of the body. In his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* of 1624, Donne prays for his departed neighbour, that his soul ‘may quickly returne to a joifull reunion to that body which it hath left’.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the same century, Jeremy Taylor, Bishop of Down and Connor, and sometime Fellow of All Souls — his portrait looks down over us in the Hall — advanced a similar view. The Church Fathers, Taylor noted, had prayed for the dead, petitioning that God would ‘shew them mercy,’ ‘hasten the resurrection,’ and ‘give a blessed sentence in the great day.’ ‘Such general prayers for the dead,’ he wrote, ‘... the church of England did never condemn

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<sup>7</sup> Laudable Practice, “‘THAT WITH THEM WE’: WHY 1662 HAS NO NEED FOR ALL SOULS’ DAY”, <https://laudablepractice.blogspot.com/2020/11/that-with-them-we-why-1662-has-no-need.html>, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, and see <https://www.biblestudytools.com/classics/the-works-of-john-donne-vol-1/sermon-xii.html>, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Robert W. Reeder, “‘Charitable Extasie’ and Prayer for the Dead in Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*”, *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 56/1 (2016), 93-110: p. 95.

by any express article, but left it in the middle; and by her practice declares her faith of 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; but expressly condemns the doctrine of purgatory, and consequently all prayers for the dead relating to it.<sup>10</sup>

Taylor's great manuals of Christian ethics, *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, would continue to exert a powerful influence on Anglican piety into the eighteenth century. Among those who fell under their sway was John Wesley, another Oxford churchman, who defended prayer for the dead — again in the sense of hoping for their imminent resurrection — on the grounds that the Lord Himself taught us to pray 'Thy Kingdom come'.<sup>11</sup>

Powerful as these precedents may be – and noting too the influence of the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century – it was the reaction to the trauma of the First World War that established prayer for the dead — and with it the marking of All Souls — as a noteworthy component of public Anglican piety. As Alan Wilkinson wrote in his 1978 book *The Church of England and the First World War*, 'In 1914 public prayer for the dead was uncommon in the Church of England; by the end of the war it had become widespread'.<sup>12</sup> An indicator of this shift is a sermon given by Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, on All Souls Day 1914, in which he

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<sup>10</sup> Reginald Heber (ed.), *The whole works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor, D.D., Lord Bishop of Down, Connor, and Dromore: with a life of the author, and a critical examination of his writings* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1847-54), vol. vi, pp. 195-6.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Hockin, *John Wesley and Modern Wesleyanism* (London: J.T. Hayes, 1873), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 176.

sought, like Donne and Taylor, to disassociate legitimate prayer for the dead from medieval innovations in doctrine and practice:

‘But surely now,’ the Archbishop said, ‘there is place for a gentler recognition of the instinctive, the natural, the loyal craving of the bereaved, and the abuses of the chantry system and the extravagances of Tetzal [a reference to the Dominican friar and preacher on indulgences Johann Tetzal] need not now, nearly four centuries afterwards, thwart or hinder the reverent, the absolutely trustful prayer of a wounded spirit who feels it natural and helpful to pray for him whom we shall not greet on earth again, but who, in his Father’s loving keeping, still lives, and, as we may surely believe, still grows from strength to strength in truer purity and in deepened reverence and love.’<sup>13</sup>

The deep sense of grief that motivated the change in attitudes towards the commemoration of the dead was felt at this College as much as anywhere else. Wilkinson cites an account given by A.C. Headlam – Fellow of All Souls and later Bishop of Gloucester – of a service held in this chapel on All Souls Day, 1917:

‘We had our service this morning. I do not think that I have ever felt the tragedy of the War more – the chapel filled almost entirely with old men and the roll of the killed and the feeling of sadness. At one point in the service a great sob came from Wilkinson [this is Spenser Wilkinson, the first Chichele Professor of Military History, and a Fellow of the College from 1909], whose

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

son was killed: and I did not know whether I should get through; but just when I thought I might fail I got stronger.’<sup>14</sup>

It was Archbishop Davidson, a noted ‘commonsense moderate’ in the Anglican Church,<sup>15</sup> who guided the attempt at revising the Book of Common Prayer in 1927-28. Among the new features of the revised Prayer Book were prayers for the dead in the Burial and Communion rites and provision for the commemoration of All Souls. The proposed collect for the day included a request that God ‘grant to the faithful departed all the unsearchable benefits of thy Son’s passion; that in the day of his appearing they may be manifested as thy true children’.<sup>16</sup>

Though the 1928 Prayer Book was ultimately rejected following Evangelical objections in the House of Commons, All Souls Day would finally be included as a Lesser Festival of the Church of England in *Common Worship*, the series of liturgical resources published at the beginning of this century. *Common Worship* justifies the commemoration of All Souls in the following terms:

‘No Christian is solitary. Through baptism we become members one of another in Christ, members of a company of saints whose mutual belonging transcends death ... All Saints’ Day and the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed on All Souls’ Day both celebrate this mutual belonging. All Saints’ Day celebrates men and women in whose lives the Church as a whole has

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> “Randall Thomas Davidson, Baron Davidson”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 21 May. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Randall-Thomas-Davidson-Baron-Davidson>, accessed 30 October 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Laudable Practice, “‘THAT WITH THEM WE’”.



seen the grace of God powerfully at work. It is an opportunity to give thanks for that grace, and for the wonderful ends to which it shapes a human life; it is a time to be encouraged by the example of the saints and to recall that sanctity may grow in the ordinary circumstances, as well as the extraordinary crises, of human living. The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed celebrates the saints in a more local and intimate key. It allows us to remember with thanksgiving before God those whom we have known more directly: those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith.<sup>17</sup>

This focus on the local — where All Saints focuses on the universal — seems to me to make a lot of sense, and today I particularly wish to remember those members of this College community who have died in recent years. I think especially of Lisa Lodwick, who tragically left us just over a year ago to the day, and Peter Harper, a much-loved College porter who died this summer, just three years into his retirement.

What is it that we do — or ought to do — when we commemorate those whom we have known and loved who have died? We are, at this time, living in a season of darkness. Physically, the days are getting shorter and shorter. Culturally, we have just been encouraged to celebrate the ghoulish at Halloween. Morally, we discover that ancient hatreds — including the evil of anti-Semitism, for which Christians have historically born a shameful responsibility — still poison people's hearts. And next Sunday we remember

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons/all>, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

the horrors of war, horrors which too many today are still experiencing at first hand.

In his *First Letter to the Thessalonians*, which we heard this morning, Paul describes the followers of Christ as ‘children of light’.<sup>18</sup> This is the light of Christ — what Jesus in John’s Gospel calls ‘the light of life’<sup>19</sup> — which the darkness does not comprehend,<sup>20</sup> for Christ has abolished death.<sup>21</sup> Paul indicates that this light unites all who follow Jesus, both to Christ Himself and to one another, regardless of whether they are ‘awake or asleep’.<sup>22</sup> The means to receive it are the three Pauline virtues — or what Jeremy Taylor calls the ‘internal actions’ of religion<sup>23</sup> — of faith, hope and charity or love<sup>24</sup>: *Faith* in the saving power of the death and resurrection of Christ, *hope* in the life to come, and *love* for God and our neighbour.

Whether it take the form of petitionary prayer or prayerful thanksgiving, the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed is an opportunity to express our faith in the victory of the divine light over the darkness of death, our hope in the resurrection of the dead, and our love for those we have known, whether they are alive in this world or the next. Personally, my prayer for All Souls Day is that our hearts be sufficiently softened that our minds might be opened to what Cranmer’s collect for the Second Sunday in Advent calls ‘the blessed hope of everlasting life’. And as we remember the dead, let us remember the

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

<sup>19</sup> John 8:12.

<sup>20</sup> John 1:5.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Timothy 1:10.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:10.

<sup>23</sup> Heber (ed.), *The whole works*, vol. iv, p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

prophecy of Isaiah, that 'the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 35:10.