

Homily: 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Remembrance Sunday) 2020

Whilst I was doing my rounds in the hospital on Friday, I called into one of the wards where there is a ward clerk on duty by the entrance. Around her desk is a Perspex screen, put up in the last few months to protect her from catching the virus from those who come to the ward. It's a common enough sight these days, but this one was a little different: she had decorated it with images of poppies – some drawn, some cut out from magazines, some were photos showing pictures of poppy fields. It struck me as a lovely act of remembrance – a creative way to mark this day, in a year when so many events will either not take place or will be greatly scaled back.

One of the most moving elements of Remembrance Sunday services is when a lone bugler plays "The Last Post". It's a haunting tune, one which we always associate with our tributes to and prayers for the war dead. Whenever we hear it, we are reminded of their sacrifice; we give thanks for their willingness to risk and to give their lives so that we might enjoy freedom and peace. And when we hear a bugle playing this tune, we are also reminded that this life is finite – none of us is here for ever. Perhaps in a certain way it points us to what St Paul today calls "the trumpet of God." This 'Last Trumpet' will sound when this finite world comes to its end, and the Lord returns in glory.

At this time of year the Church reminds us of this truth. Our lives on earth must end, and so must our world itself. Our universe will not go on for ever. But the Church never approaches this in any morbid or pessimistic way. We are a people of hope, and this hope gives us joy. In today's second reading St Paul draws a distinction between us as people of faith and "those who have no hope". He teaches us that death is not the end, but is in fact the gateway to a life united with the Lord in heaven. Whether we are still alive at the Lord's coming or whether we have already died will make no difference: all will be raised. Every grave will be empty. Every memorial will be redundant. Today, as we remember those who died in conflict, we keep this hope in our hearts. Throughout this month, when we remember and pray for the faithful departed, especially those on our November list, we reaffirm our faith in the resurrection of Jesus and the hope that His victory over death holds for us.

When Jesus opened up the way to eternal life, He began to lead us in a great procession to the eternal feast of heaven. That feast, and indeed that procession, are the subject of today's Gospel. Jesus uses the image of a wedding night – an image well known to the culture of the time, but may need a little explanation for us. The bride and bridegroom have been betrothed to one another for some time. Tonight, the bridegroom will come to the home of his bride; then they will walk together in procession through the town, accompanied by the bridesmaids, carrying lamps to dispel the darkness of the night. They process to their new home, their marital home, where they will celebrate a great feast. From this night the bride and groom will be united – they become one.

The parable symbolises our journey of faith. The bridegroom is Christ; He comes and leads us to the great marriage feast of heaven. He leads this procession through the darkness,

and He teaches us to be ready to welcome Him and to walk with Him. As we heard, in the parable some of the bridesmaids are foolish – they do not bring enough oil, and their lamps begin to burn out. So the Lord reminds us that we need to be persistent, to remain faithful. Initial enthusiasm for Him is not enough – we have to be able to walk with Him and to have enough oil for the full length of the journey.

What is this oil? There are many reasons for thinking that it represents good works – we must continue to live lives of love for our brothers and sisters. Without that, our light goes out. Our readings today also link it with wisdom, which the first reading tells us “is bright, and does not grow dim”. Perhaps it represents keeping a strong faith throughout our lives, and living by the hope which flows from that. At baptism, there’s a prayer which speaks of this: [let’s suppose it’s a little girl who is being baptised] “May she keep the flame of faith alive in her heart, and when the Lord comes, may she go out to meet Him, with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.” This light – the light of faith – has been put into our hearts. We must walk by this light until the Lord comes to take us to heaven.

In a sense, we could say that the Lord has already come and already leads us to eternal life. Imagine the scene in the Gospel: the bridegroom and the wedding party process through the streets in the dark of night, heading for the wedding feast, guided by the lamps. Here is a lovely image here for our lives. Jesus has come for us. He walks with us. He leads us to the wedding feast of heaven. He walks with us in the darkness we sometimes feel in this world. He Himself is our guide, but He asks us also to keep our lamps alight for the journey – we are to nurture the flame of faith He has lit within us, discern with wisdom His will, express our faith in good works which bring light into our world. We are to be light for each other on this journey, sharing the light that He has first given to us. At the end of the journey we will celebrate the great banquet of eternal life, the wedding supper of the Lamb, at which God’s perfect love for His people is finally revealed, and we will be held in loving union for eternity. So, dear friends, let’s keep our torches shining! Let’s walk with the Lord, even when the world seems dark. Let’s keep our eyes fixed on what He promises: the end of our journey, the great feast of His unending love.

Fr Andrew

