

Ord 31. Commemoration of All Souls
11.2.25

(Wisdom 3:1-9; Ps 23; Romans 5: 5-11; John 6:37-40)

I attended graduate school at St. John's University in Collegeville, MN. St. John's is located about 90 minutes north of Minneapolis / St. Paul. I experienced the season of Fall two times while at St. John's. Now the Fall in Minnesota was very different from my experience of that season in Pennsylvania, where I grew up. The two years I was at St. John's, I recall we had our first dusting of snow in the middle of October. And then around Halloween, we had our first real snowfall - about three feet of it. The snow stayed on the ground until after Easter.

St. John's had a beautiful tradition of celebrating the Commemoration of All Souls each November 2nd in the Abbey Church. Since it was a Benedictine Community, all the monks would gather together for that Mass. After Mass, the monks and those attended the Mass processed out the front door of the church and trudged through the snow to the Abbey cemetery. As you can imagine, it was bitterly cold that time of year and the walk to the cemetery was not pleasant. But the journey was made tolerable by the beautiful songs the monks sang while processing there. And the surroundings glowed with the light from the processional candles which the servers held. The barrenness of the surroundings and the inherent sadness which was present as the celebrant recalled those souls who had passed from this life to the next hung over the group. But there was also a sense of hope and even joy which you could feel in the music and see in the candlelight.

On one occasion, I stood with two monks who looked down on the grave of a brother monk who had died several years before. As the prayers for the dead were being recited, I heard them reminisce about this one particular monk. It was apparent that he wasn't especially liked. Then the one monk said louder than he should have, "well, with the life he led, I guess Richard is in a much warmer place than we are!" The whole crowd paused and even gasped at the comment. Then everyone started to laugh. It is memory that I will treasure.

That experience on the Commemoration of All Souls those many years ago seems to capture two emotions which we experience when a loved one dies. Of course, we are sad when thinking about how our connection to that loved one seems severed. Our mourning is intense, because of the deep love we have shared with them. Being deprived of experiencing that love in the here and now is painful and heartbreaking. But as Christians, we profess and believe that Christ gives us a share in his resurrection – in the life to come, but also in this life as well. As Jesus teaches, the Kingdom of God is **HERE**. In other words, heaven starts **HERE**. It's not **UP THERE** or something we experience on the day we die. While we may experience sadness and the pain of loss when someone we love dies, the hope of Christ's resurrection and the embrace offered to us by the People of God in a moment like that surrounds us and sustains us, giving us the courage to continue on. St. Paul speaks about that hope in his ***Letter to the Romans***, our second reading at Mass today. In the midst of suffering and affliction, he tells us "...hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the (H)oly Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5)

I find it interesting and more than providential, that Pope Francis used that scripture verse as the headliner to the Jubilee Year which he initiated on Christmas Eve, 2024. Pope Francis reminded us that even in the worst of circumstances, Christ brings hope to our hearts. It is that hope which enables us to face any challenge or crisis. Even death.

I'm guessing that Pope Francis held on to that hope as he faced the many health challenges he experienced shortly after he opened the Jubilee Year festivities. I'm sure it was that hope he clung to when hospitalized and when having trouble breathing and walking the last few months of his life. I'm sure it was that hope of everlasting life promised by Christ which sustained him as he came to realize he wouldn't be able to close out the Jubilee Year. Through it all, Pope Francis was an ambassador of hope. Up to his last breath, Pope Francis remained an ambassador of hope to all the world. And he constantly reminded us in the four or five short months he presided over the Jubilee Year that we are to be ambassadors of hope as well.

My mom passed away suddenly almost three decades ago. The shock of that experience is something that remains with me to this day. Before her funeral I was worried that I might not be able to celebrate her funeral Mass. I was numb and emotionally raw. A classmate of mine from the seminary listened to me as I shared my concern. He had a simple and direct bit of advice for me at that time. He said, "for God's sake, your mother gave birth to you and raised you. This is the least you can do for her." That encouragement from a friend and brother priest helped me to face my deep loss and fears. His words and his presence with me

helped me to find hope in an awful moment in my life. I celebrated my mom's funeral and preached the homily at that Mass. It was tough. It was accompanied by a lot of tears. But it was with faith and hope – gifts and blessings which my mom fostered in me all those years – that enabled me to celebrate her funeral liturgy.

At the end of that Mass, we sang a song that captures the spirit of this Commemoration as well as the feelings we have when we endure the death of someone we love deeply. The song is based on Isaiah 40:31. It reminds us that death is not the end. Death does not have the last word. But with Christ, even in death, we can live in hope, because Christ has conquered sin. He overcame death through his resurrection and gives us a share in his forgiveness and new life in this world and the world to come.

As I conclude this homily, I'd like to share three of the verses of that song and then finish with the refrain. As we reflect on our beloved dead and pray for their happy repose with God on this Commemoration of All Souls, may the God we believe in sustain our faith, build up our hope, and allow us to rejoice at the new and everlasting life he offers to all who trust in him.

1. Like a shepherd I will feed you; I will gather you with care. I will lead you and hold you close to my heart.

2. I am strength to the weary; to the weak I am new life. Though the young may grow weary, I will be their hope.

4. Fear not, I am with you; I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you; uphold you with my hand.

Refrain: We will run and not grow weary, for our God will be our strength,
and we will fly like the eagle, we will rise again.*

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen. And may their souls and all the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen.

**We Will Rise Again, David Haas.*