

Hebrews 12:1. With this great cloud of witnesses around us.

"What are the dead doing?"

Twin unborn babies, conversing in the womb. Says one: "Leaving this womb can mean nothing but death and the end for us. We are absolutely dependent on this environment which sustains us." Says the other: "That cannot be right. For nine months nature has been preparing us for something." Replies the first: "Then describe for me what lies ahead. What is the world you think we are going to be born into like?" "I cannot do it. I have no idea what it is like". To which the unbelieving baby responds with scorn: "That is blind faith". But it was the second baby who was right.

This morning I preach on something I know nothing about. Not, you may say, for the first time. The title, "What are the dead doing?" is prompted by the scripture passage we read today: it is these words in the Letter to the Hebrews: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." "With this great cloud of witnesses around us". What are the dead doing? They are witnessing.

What witnesses do is to tell their own stories. I was once a witness in a criminal trial, and I found it a difficult experience. I tried to keep calm by reminding myself that what is wanted of a witness is not eloquence nor analysis but a story. All I had to do was to tell what I had seen. The dead are still telling their own stories. That is what the doctrine of the resurrection of the body means. When Christians say in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body" that is not so much, I think, a conclusion about what happens to the atoms which make up my twelve stones as it is about my story: it is that what my life is and has

been and will be, what I have seen and done, who I am, will be raised by God and not obliterated, destroyed, forgotten.

Next Sunday we will be remembering the war dead. Soldiers and civilians. Paschendaele and D-Day and Korea and Belfast Afghanistan and Iraq. The stories of those who have so often been forgotten are not forgotten but are alive to God and are able to be told and understood and somehow completed. Who does not feel the hurt and anger of those whose loved ones gave up their lives and then were forgotten? The agonising sense of unfinished stories and unfair conclusions which is so much part of the human situations. Who does not need to hear that what the dead are doing is "witnessing"? Telling their own stories. And in the providence of God they are stories which are listened to and still live.

"With this great cloud of witnesses around us." What the dead are doing is witnessing. But the word has another meaning. It does not simply mean telling their own stories. It also means "watching". Such a cloud of witnesses around us. Around this generation; around this congregation. Around each of us. Such a cloud of witnesses, watching, you. That might be very frightening; or it might be wonderfully encouraging.

There must have been times in your life when it would have saved everything if only you had thought of that great cloud of witnesses watching, sharing, feeling your life. When just one recalling of a parent, or of a dear friend, or a childhood influence, could have turned you around and kept you from danger. That kind of witnessing of our lives might be frightening, and sometimes we need and deserve to be frightened.

But the thought, the feeling, the faith that what the dead are doing is witnessing your life is also an immense gift. When Christians say in The Apostles' Creed "I believe in the communion of saints" it is of this gift they speak. A gift of these witnesses sharing, supporting, loving, praying. Sometimes bereaved people say they have a very clear sense of the presence of the dead person whom they have loved and that that presence supports them and makes life possible. Just as often people say

they cannot feel that: but it might be real even though we cannot feel it. Such a great cloud of witnesses, sharing, supporting, loving, praying.

This great cloud of witnesses. These witnesses are telling their own story. And they are witnessing our lives. But also they are witnesses to the good news of God's love: they are witnesses to the gospel. In the Bible "Witness" is a technical term. For the Bible a witness is one who points to the grace and mercy and victory and bright light of God: and that is what the dead are doing.

Among the Bible's strongest images are the pictures of worship in heaven. No-one knows what the dead are doing: but once you have read these pictures of worship in heaven in the Book of Revelation it is difficult to get it out of your head. We have just sung one of these passages

*Hark how the adoring hosts above with songs surround the throne
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues; but all their hearts are one
Worthy the Lamb that died, they cry, to be exalted thus
Worthy the lamb, let us reply, for he was slain for us.*

*To him who sits upon the throne, the God whom we adore
And to the Lamb that once was slain, be glory evermore.*

When Christians say in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the life everlasting" this is what they mean.

What are the dead doing? Witnessing and worshipping and watching. Watching the beautiful refurbishment of this already beautiful church. Watching and waiting, like the rest of us, to see what will become of it. Every time some child, fresh and innocent and excited, hears here that she is precious to God and needed by God; every time that some child tear-stained and frightened and hurt knows here that he is loved and healed and belongs; Every time here old people find that they are not forgotten but remembered, not useless but useful, not only receivers but also givers; every time the people of God have the water of life splashed on their faces or much the bread of life - Every time from this church the people of the community of Morningside discover the energy and the

healing and the mission of the church of Christ, the welcome and the judgment and the hope of the church of Christ; every time this city and the whole created world receive from this church the justice and the peace of God then, every time, the great crowd of witnesses give heavenly thanks and praise to God for Morningside Parish Church. Trumpets sound in heaven and the whole great chorus of those who were dead and are dead no more cry "Glory"

In 1936 the greatest English poet since Wordsworth visited a deserted village church. Europe was in turmoil, questions about the new king divided the nation and the poet himself was in a difficult place in his life. After seeing the church at Little Gidding, T S Eliot wrote perhaps his finest poem. Despite his being conservative in his politics, and intensely conservative in his churchmanship, Eliot's poem reflects that the old ways will do no longer. Neither for church, nor for the world. No longer will the old ways satisfy, no longer will the old ways solve. Eliot wrote
*For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.*

This day, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, we have dedicated the new beauties of this church to the glory of God and to the way of God in the world. Thankful for what is past, but looking and listening for what God has in store for the future. We wonder and we wait in faith and in hope. And listening.
*For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.*