

Standing around

Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

Shuffling off this mortal coil; buying the farm; pushing up the daisies; kicking the bucket; popping their clogs; croaked; six feet under. These are just a few of the euphemisms people use when talking about death. Those of a certain age might remember the Monty Python sketch about the dead parrot and could come up with a few more euphemisms that try to take the sting out of death, tame the sense of bereavement people feel when someone they knew and loved died.

Other phrases have come in and out of fashion too. In my last parish there was a stained glass window, dedicated to someone who had died in Victorian times, and after the person's name, the phrase, "Gone home." One of the older church members of the congregation, whose funeral I did ultimately take, would always sit in front of that window and could be heard muttering, once she turned 80, "It's about time I went home too. But I'll leave a forwarding address if anyone wants to know where I am."

It's not always easy to laugh in the face of death. Many people hope for a quiet, dignified end, on a bed with snowy white linen, surrounded by loved ones, or not, as the case may be, and quietly slipping away with a little sigh, and a final closing of the eyes.

It is perplexing in our modern age where commitment to any faith tradition is shaky, that one of the strongest remaining folk beliefs has to do with death and what might lie beyond it. As the commitment to faith in any of the organised religions diminishes, the need for people to believe in something more than this life remains incredibly strong. In popular culture, and certainly in the press, few people seem to die any more. They have, 'gone to a better place.' They have 'passed on', or 'passed over', or 'passed away'. Where are they going?

It seems to me that there is something, still, buried deep in the DNA of humanity, that has a need to deal with death and put it into some kind of context so that those who are left behind, however broken, bruised or scarred by bereavement can begin, at some point, to come to terms with what has happened. Is it an acceptance of death and dying, or a difficulty in realising that all life comes to an end at some point. And then?

This is the season, not traditionally marked by the Church of Scotland in any significant way for centuries, of All Saints. We've passed through Halloween, the All Saints (or all hallows) Day, remembering the saints known and unknown of the past who have helped shape and pass on faith; and then the lesser known All Souls-day, in earlier times and other Christian traditions a time to remember those who have died. Those who have died, the ordinary saints and the extraordinary saints, have no powers to intervene in the life of the world today, but their memory and their example can live on, and be an encouragement to us. We remember not only who they were, but what they said and did, and wonder how that might shape our lives today. The stained glass windows in our church are filled with saints, we're surrounded by them.

In the pews and seats of our church, over all the years we have been here other saints have sat too, surrounding us. Today saints are still here, surrounding us. Saints are not confined to the dead and long gone. Saints are alive and well and sitting next to you right now. Saints are not simply a past memory, they are a present reality. You, in your faith today, are a saint. Not perfect, but working towards fulfilling your potential for good, and helping others along the way. A sinner maybe, but one who tries again and again to turn towards God, and often succeeds. And light comes.

There are few descriptions of heaven and the life after death in the Bible. Rightly so. Our purpose in this life is to live our best lives now, here on earth, as if each day were our last, doing what we

are able to do to help. The Book of Revelation, perhaps the most difficult of all books in the Bible, honours a great multitude of saints from every nation, wearing white robes, carrying palm branches (echoing Palm Sunday) as they stand around the throne of God, and the Lamb of God. There are so many angels and saints, no one can count them. They are everybody; and they sing! It is what saints do.

This season of All Saints-tide is not meant to be a miserable one focussing on the dead and those we have loved and lost. Not to be standing and sitting around doing nothing. It is a time of giving thanks for lives, long or short, fulfilled or unfulfilled, which now, like our own, find themselves in the hands of God. This image of heaven, and earth, is not meant to terrify us but to comfort us and encourage us. It is a reminder that in life we will always be interrupted by death. It is a reminder that in death we have, through our faith, weak or strong, to keep moving towards the new life.

The shape, dimensions, temperature and detail of that new life in heaven are not given to us clearly. What *is* given is that in God's house, as Jesus says elsewhere, there are many mansions, many rooms, and there we, and those who have died, will find a place. A place at God's table, a place around God's throne, a place in the hands of God where we and our loved ones will find rest and peace when death comes, stepping into the next life.

"In the midst of whatever is going on around them, believers always sing. Day or night, in desert or oasis, whether in prison or free, during calm or storm, they sing: "Salvation belongs to our God Who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!"ⁱ Whether you are vocally a dove or a raven, in heaven, whether in four part harmony or unison, as we gather around God's throne, in heaven and on earth, living and dead, there is a joyful noise. This singing heaven. Not simply standing around but singing.

I suspect there will be other things we get to do in heaven too – new discoveries, old lessons forgotten and relearned, opportunities offered, the moving upwards and onwards, the familiar and the unfamiliar. But always the delight and the joy.

In the midst of these sometimes terrible times, through sickness, death, persecution, storms, war, social upheaval, political deceit and incompetence, housing crisis in our city, fuel poverty, saints keep on listening to the world and all its people and their needs, and singing, not to distract, but to engage.

Saints do not sing to anaesthetise themselves from reality, but to confront it and, where possible, to transform it. The angels and saints standing around the throne of God are not simply singing. They sing to encourage themselves, and us, to get involved with God's world, and where we are able, to give ourselves courage to live in the present, remember the past, and face the future. There is no silence, no blind-eye-turning in this vision of heaven. No faithful soul who is in the world, or the world to come can keep from singing or listening before the throne of God. Our singing keeps hope alive in our world because it is directed to God, through God and back into God's world with God's wisdom, healing, love and blessing.

The saints of God today take the blessings of God, all those beatitudes Jesus' taught on the mountain which we read in Matthew's gospel and bring them to bear on the world in which we live today. Our singing inspires us to work with the poor in spirit, to comfort the mourning, to share with the meek, to satisfy those requiring justice, to be merciful to the vulnerable, to purify our hearts so that we might see God, to work for peace, and to endure ridicule and even persecution so that our reward may be great in heaven. Where we, with all God's children, will stand around the throne and sing.

The qualities of God's saints are to be found in those blessings Jesus taught on the mountain. Read them again. Are they part of the way you live? The qualities of God's saints will be found not simply amongst those standing around in heaven, but in their listening, and in their singing. The God we worship will come down from His throne, to guide us to places where we will be nurtured. When life has been bitter and hard and painful and brutal, God will heal the hurts, and comfort each one of us, and wipe away every tear from every eye.

Saints in heaven, saints on earth, saints in the past, saints in the future, and saints in the here and now. Standing, listening, singing, doing, being God's people today, and working towards brightness and hopefulness and a better world today.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

¹ Tom Tate, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, p220