

I have always loved the feast of All Souls. I suppose this partly has to do with my preference for autumn and winter over spring and summer. There is something in these seasons that resonates with the character of my soul. I like looking out on dark, cold evenings from within a warm, lamplit room; watching the raindrops trickle down the window-pane against the black night outside; and in pre-Covid days (thank God we can still remember them!) sitting with friends round a candlelit table sharing food and wine. In Denmark they even have a special word for it: *hygge*. *Hygge* has almost become a fashion trend these days, but I knew it and experienced it long before the fashion, on my numerous trips to visit friends in Copenhagen over the years. It cannot be properly translated into English by a single word, but it is a combination of cosy, warm, safe, friendly and sheltered. Anyone whose cat or dog has stretched out in front of the fire or snuggled up in its basket in the evening, will be well aware that animals absolutely love *hygge*. They revel in feeling cosy, warm, safe and sheltered. *Hygge*, it seems, is a basic instinct in us. Oh, I love bright, cold mornings too, feeling the shiver of the first winter frost; my heart is uplifted

by the new green life of spring and the restrained warmth of the first weeks of summer; but everything that is part of *hygge* appeals to me much more. Although it may well seem a superficial kind of reason, I think perhaps I like the feast of All Souls because it falls in one of my favourite times of the year.

A deeper and more significant reason for the emotional sympathy I have for it, is that it calls to mind all those people I have loved and lost: my parents (who had to wait thirty-five years to be reunited in the next stage of the one life), uncles, aunts, friends, priest-friends, teachers and mentors. Remembering these very different but equally loved individuals does not sadden me – rather, I feel closer to them because I know that nothing has been lost. All Souls confirms and sustains my conviction that what has come forth from God will ultimately return to him, in its totality and wholeness. Even the religion of the contemporary age – science – tells us that matter can neither be created nor destroyed, but can only change form. Not only science, but also poetry, art, music and (except for the most incorrigibly materialistic) philosophy. Death, as the Indian spiritual writer

Rabindranath Tagore said, is not extinguishing the light – it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.

It seems to me that we need to ‘adjust’ whatever we may have learned or been taught or have believed about Purgatory, where the souls of the faithful departed are said to go. Firstly, it is not a place but a state of being: when we feel happy, are we in a particular place? When we are overcome with sadness, do we put ourselves in a specific location? Does hunger mean that we are in a physical space? No: all of these things are conditions, states of being. It was this kind of concrete, spatial thinking that enabled the Church to invent Limbo, in order to explain where the souls of unbaptized babies go; fortunately, Limbo was quietly done away with during the pontificate of Benedict XVI. Purgatory likewise has suffered from this conceptual confusion. The idea of souls languishing in lakes of fire, awaiting our prayers to set them free, was a medieval construct and, to Martin Luther’s fury, was used to sell indulgences that contributed towards building the new St Peter’s basilica in Rome: you paid for a chit specifying time off in Purgatory and applied it to whichever deceased relative you thought most needed it.

The Dominican Johann Tetzel, peddling these indulgences in Germany, had this catchphrase:

“As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory joyfully springs.”

The medieval understanding of Purgatory as a ‘place’ of purifying suffering was inherited and sentimentalised by the Victorian Catholic Church, finding its apogée perhaps in Cardinal (now Saint) John Henry Newman’s *Dream of Gerontius*. Elgar’s setting of Newman’s poem is one of my most loved pieces of music, but not the theology behind it. The piety of the 19th century smoothed the rough edges of medieval eschatology – death, judgement, heaven and hell – but, at the same time, perpetuated the idea of Purgatory i) as an actual place; and ii) as an anteroom to the bliss of upstairs or the horror of downstairs.

Other voices, since, have spoken of different ways of understanding, especially in our modern times. These voices have taught that what we call Purgatory (and even the Church, wisely, does not define it in any detail) is a *continuation of our journey*. Because this journey of ours does indeed go on. In a particular scene from *The Lord of the*

Rings, a world-wide literary phenomenon written by a devout Catholic (J.R.R. Tolkien), Gandalf reassures Pippin, who fears that the end has come at the battle of Minas Tirith:

“End? No, the journey doesn’t end here. Death is just another path... one that we all must take.”

And the taking of it is no doubt as individual as each one of us ourselves is.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a world-famous psychiatrist who specialised in terminally ill children and near-death experiences, specified these characteristics of death:

i) No one is ever alone when they die. This includes suicides. They are surrounded by invisible presences who welcome them with understanding, compassion and love and help them across the great divide...

ii) They are met on ‘the other side’ by someone they knew and loved: a parent, grandparent, beloved friend, or a religious figure they have been particularly devoted to...

iii) They are shown by loving helpers to the place which is best for them to continue their journey...

Will we recognise those we have known and loved, who have gone ahead of us? Absolutely! What else would be the

point of knowing and loving them in the first place? An acquaintance of mine, the late Dr Martin Israel, who – born a Jew in South Africa, became a medical doctor, the President of the Royal College of Pathologists, then an Anglican priest – once told me that most people after death find themselves more-or-less as they were before, but without pain or suffering of any kind. Part of Martin's extensive ministry was to pray for those who had died but found themselves 'lost' because they had had no religious belief in their lifetime.

Our so-called 'dead' are not dead. Life and being can never be lost in this way. Death is nothing: it is an integral part of the one eternal life, a further bank in the ever-flowing river of existence, a circumstance, a happenstance which we all experience when it comes to us – but nothing more. Neither do those we have loved and 'lost' flail and paddle in the fiery waters of an incessant Purgatory, waiting for our liberating prayers and sacrifices to set them free.

The simple truth is this: for all of us, the journey goes on.

It goes on in as many ways, aspects, paths and forms that the individual imagination is capable of conceiving. Further: it

strikes me as philosophically illogical and theologically myopic to propose that the state of the soul is unalterably fixed by the death of the body. Why? Is it not preferable to believe that a sinner who, in this stage of the one life has preferred deeds of darkness, can be led in the next stage to turn towards the light?

All of this means, according to the impulse of my own heart, that I believe (for example) my father – who did not have a religious bone in his body but who was probably a better man because of it – is continuing his journey into the infinite Being of God. Dante in his *Divina Commedia* portrays this as a ‘multifoliate rose’: the vision of God that Beatrice shows him is a rose with an infinite number of petals – and each one of those petals is a human soul. The rose is one: the petal-souls are one: God is one.

All this, I reckon, is implicit in our celebration of the feast of All Souls. Which is why I love it so.