

## The first and the last: Revelation ch.1



*Jesus said: Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore; and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (Revelation 1.17-18).*

Today we begin a new series of readings from Daniel in the Old Testament and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. They're both rather appropriate to take us through the next few weeks as we move into a second lockdown with all the feelings of doubt and uncertainty that brings. Both in their different ways turn our attention upward: to the heavenly realities that are still there behind the mists of confusion and uncertainty we struggle with in our day-to-day lives. Whatever may happen, they remind us of the sunshine behind the clouds. In the words of the All Saints hymn we sang yesterday:

*And though the fight is fierce, the warfare long,*

*steals on the ear the distant triumph song,  
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong  
Alleluia!*

Today is also All Souls Day. Thanks to the choir we were privileged to be able to remember our loved ones yesterday in a wonderful service for All Souls with the music of Fauré's Requiem. So I thought I'd just share with you what I said last night (apologies if you've already heard it!).

My brother died at the end of February — my little brother Johnny (except he was taller than me), whom I've known ever since he was born. It was cancer, not Covid — but of course the arrangements for the funeral were overtaken by the March lockdown. They had a graveside ceremony for the immediate family, on a sunny hillside overlooking the Cotswold hills where he loved to walk — but (like so many families) we still haven't been able to have a proper family gathering to celebrate his life.

This has been an extraordinary year. We've been confronted with death on a daily basis, with all the daily statistics on the news — I can't think of a time since the war when we've had anything comparable (and even then I doubt if they had the technology to do all the graphs and tables we have today).

It's been a time when we have to keep reminding ourselves that these are not just statistics — each one is a name, not a number.

- When we've felt the fear of losing loved ones suddenly, unprepared, alone.
- When we've become aware of the daily heroism of the carers who put their lives on the line to care for other people's loved ones — of the thin line that separates life from death.
- A time when we feel the need to remember.

So I think this feast of All Souls has a particular poignancy this year (even more that it's our last in-church service for a few weeks!). It's good to have a time to remember our own loved ones at this season of Remembrance — a time to pause — a time to reassure ourselves that they are not forgotten. To light a candle — to read out their names — to say a prayer for all the dead, named and unnamed.

And we are not just remembering (because of course we never forget those we have loved — they are always with us). We are here to commemorate, to remember together in the presence of Almighty God, who made and loves us — loves each and every soul, through time and eternity.

Have you noticed how a news story suddenly becomes personal when you see a photo and hear a family's story? — like that Kurdish family from Iran who drowned in the Channel last week, or the young people from Vietnam who suffocated in that dreadful lorry? Suddenly we realize that they were real people — we get a tiny glimpse of how their families must be feeling.

That's the message of All Souls — that all lives matter, that God loves each one of those who have died the way their families love them (more, in fact — infinitely more). The way we care for our loved ones is the way God cares for every soul that lives. Each one is made in the image of God, made to walk with God, to converse with God, as Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden in the cool of the day.

The Latin words of the Requiem, heightened by Fauré's powerful music, express something of our fears in the face of death — the fear of being lost, forgotten, whirled away like autumn leaves.

But Jesus speaks words of reassurance, even in the midst of the storm.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. Don’t be afraid: you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12.6-7).

If a shepherd loses one sheep out of a flock of 100, what does he do? Does he forget about it? No — he leaves the ninety-and-nine to search for the lost sheep in the wilderness, “and when he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders and carries it home rejoicing” (Luke 15.3-7).

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus says: “I know my sheep, and my sheep know my voice and follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No-one can snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10.27f.)

And — in the words we shall use in a few moments in the Act of Commemoration — Jesus said, *“Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away .... And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given me: and I will raise them up on the last day.”* *“The hour is coming, and now is, when dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live”* (John 5.25).

It doesn’t actually make any difference— alive or dead, our job is to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and to follow him — from here to Eternity.

When we were small, my brother and I used to go to the Scripture Union beach mission in Abersoch. We learned a lot of what they called “choruses” — little songs that somehow stick in your head. Here’s one to hold on to

when times are tough:

He will hold me fast,

He will hold me fast:

For my Saviour loves me so,

He will hold me fast.

My sister-in-law sent me a picture of my brother's grave a few months after the funeral. She had scattered a packet of cottage garden seeds over the soil, not thinking anything would grow — and it was covered with a glorious riot of poppies and cornflowers and marigolds and daisies. A lovely reminder of the great truth that (in the words of St Paul) — *nothing* can separate us from the love of God: neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth — nor Covid, nor lockdown — nor anything else in all creation shall be able to separate us (and our loved ones) from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing!

God bless, Loveday

2nd November 2020