

Sometimes at this time of year, as the evenings draw in when it still feels like it is the middle of afternoon, I am struck by the warm light that falls from windows as you walk home, or more often as I pass houses and flats on the bus. Sometimes I wonder about the stories behind the lights – in a way that I don't other times of the year when it is unclear whether people are at home.

Sometimes too when I am in this mood, I am reminded of that house, of people I have known who have lived there. While I have been only in Queen's Park for five and a half years, I have been working in the Kilburn area over ten, and I am surprised sometimes as I go past houses or places that I am reminded of people from that place.

The story for me of Kilburn and Queens Park is a patchwork of people's stories, people I have taught, some I have conducted marriages or baptisms, and some I have buried. Little snippets of lives and stories that in some way now overlap with my own.

Sometimes though as I move around the area I hear the chorus of the Toni Child's song – the dead are dancing – going through my brain – *only darkness here – the dead are dancing*. This for me is not a sad song, but a sombre one – a reminder that I walk the ground that others have walked, that in the years past others have touched; and at some level this changes each year.

One of the things about Kingdom Season, the Season of the Church from All Saints to the start of Advent, is that there is a lot of remembering. Remembering for lots of different reasons – and some how the fact that the evenings are drawing in seems to make this even more reflective.

One of the things I notice for myself however, is that it is not a sad time, in fact it is one of my favourite times of year, a time to notice the ebb and flow of life, to consider who has inspired me, who I miss, who I am not spending enough time with, something about getting my priorities right. But in this period there is a strange pull between the dark and the light, the good memories and the sad memories, the promises I have kept, and where I have failed. And sometimes it is a time for asking hard questions of God.

The passage that we heard from the letter to the Romans, is in many ways Paul trying to work out this complexity. On the one hand he wants us to know there are opposites, strong and weak – sin and forgiveness; but also he understands that a faithful relationship with God involves more than this simple answer.

Paul was a man who thought he had that peace of God; thought he was reconciled to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He had studied and lived the Law, the Torah. He had been an important religious leader. But then he picked up his cross to follow Jesus. He saw that the way of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation can also be a way of suffering, and also may have different paths and answers.

While often to our modern ears Paul's writing seems harsh and exclusive, if we look beyond the language to the intent in his context we can find that Paul wants us to understand that in all circumstances, we have a God who loves us. God loves us so much that, even when we were (and are) weak; even while we were (and are) sinners; even when we were (and are) enemies of God, and each other. We have a faithful God who was and is willing to go to any length to reconcile us.¹

Paul clearly wrote out of his experiences. In return for being a follower of Jesus he was beaten and imprisoned. And we know that eventually he would ride into Rome, not in triumph, but to his death. But in spite of all that he experienced, Paul saw that through his suffering he grew closer to Jesus, closer to God. At some level Paul is not advocating suffering as necessary, rather he is trying to show how faith in God might sustain us through suffering to endurance and eventually to hope. To follow Jesus will bring us new life and hope in God, but it does not mean that bad things will never happen to us.

For Paul, suffering and endurance are crucial aspects of the faithful life. It is important to recognize that Paul does not say that God sends this suffering. Likewise, he is not saying that all suffering produces character and must therefore be endured without protest. All too often, in the past, this passage has served to justify pain at the hands of abusers and demand silent acceptance. To quote Paul, "by no means!" No, Paul is encouraging all of us to follow the way of Christ "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:5) That is the hope of our lives.

For many however this is a hard message, and for good reason. If we have experienced loss or grief, or life is just too hard at present, then the hope of God sometimes can feel like a long way off.

In the face of the pain and struggle of grief, Paul reminds us what Jesus, and God say to us. We know this is painful, we have known this pain too. We are sorry that you are feeling it, and we attempt in our love for you to share some of that pain and ease the load, but also your pain means you have loved – it reminds us that we are loved too.

All Souls Day can be a hard day, as we recall those who we have loved – but it is also a day of thanksgiving for those who have touched us and taught us to love.

There is no easy journey when we have faced death, even when we celebrate a long life of a friend or a family member there is still the sadness that they are no longer

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=914

with us in our day to day journey. But they are always with us as a blessing in the way we live our lives, and in the memories of them we continue to share in.

In the Gospel reading from John, Jesus reminds us of the promise of eternal life, the promise of a life which is beyond the here and now, beyond any pain we might feel, but also in many ways is beyond our understanding. Eternal life for many does not seem like a rational thought – but it is a promise of hope.

In the passage we heard, and in its surrounding verses from John's gospel we are challenged again to not see everything as opposites, we can both followers and free. John explains that "in Jesus, a relationship with God and freedom are not mutually exclusive but rather reinforce one another²".

At some levels we only know the power of hope in God when it is the only thing we have left to hold onto, when it is the only things which helps us to see who we are.

Grief never truly leaves us. It is more like a shadow or a peripheral light on the edge of our soul or memory. But our grief should not stop our living, or our hoping or our listening and responding to the love of God.

The gift of All Saints which we celebrated last week, and All Souls which we commemorate today, is that they give us an annual space to honour the profound legacy of our ancestors, and all who have gone before us. It is also a space to recognise the impact that these individuals and experiences have had on our lives, and continue to have on our lives, and also the way that God holds us and nurtures us even when we have been hurt.

It also, like the shortening days, gives us a reminder to look at the way we are living – how have we learnt from those who have gone before us – how are we continuing to grow and have hope.

The thing is, today most of all is a day of hope – a day of the snippets of life that we grab and hold onto and remember. During the week I found a new Leunig poem which I think sums this up:

*Little scraps of peace and quiet,
Hope, conversation, handshakes –
All in dribs and drabs.
A few crumbs of fun,
A tiny flake of beauty,*

² http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2009-07-01

One teaspoon of enthusiasm –
Offcuts of each other.
A skerrick of community,
A bit of a kiss.
A snippet of eye contact,
A snippet of hospitality,
A snippet of patience,
A shred of honour,
A wisp of good humour,
A sample of compassion –
Leftovers, oddments,
Remnants of the glorious situation.
A fragment of God,
Not much, really.
Sorry, time's up.³

³ <https://www.leunig.com.au/works/poems>