

All Souls Service, 2007

It has been my privilege to have been with many of you here tonight, perhaps even most of you, as you have dealt with the shocking news of a death, and have prepared for a funeral. I'm sure that David will join me in thanking you for trusting us with your precious memories, and treating us so courteously when you're at your most vulnerable – thank you.

Some of those deaths were expected, some unexpected. Some were a longed-for release, some a gentle slipping away. Some came at the end of long life with all its joys, frustrations and pleasures, and yet others assaulted us as the most shocking tragedies that can befall a parent, a sister, or a brother. For some of you these events are raw, whilst others look back across a landscape of 12 months, or so.

Despite this variety of experience, there are things in common. Sadness, feeling the loss of an important – no, not important, but a vital – part of our lives, without which we can't imagine being able to continue. Maybe there's unfinished business, plans unfulfilled. Separation: you can never fill the void left by that person because that person is unique and only that person can fill that void. Then there will be happiness and joy at some memories. A smile at the mischief they got up to.

But for many of us there is a sense of regret, of guilt, of something we wish we'd not said or done, now a longing to be able to set right misunderstandings. And maybe you feel that you are the only person who has said or done things that they regret but now cannot put right.

These feelings are common to many of us, and they are painful – but pain has its uses. Pain in our body tells us when something needs attention, and like pain in the body, pain in the mind is just as real. Untreated, it will close us down, shrivel us up into bitterness. Or it may drive us out to find comfort and consolation in the care of others. And I hope that this service is somewhere you can find comfort and consolation in the care of the church. I invite you to look on this service as an opportunity for healing.

The Christian story is about healing, and nothing but healing. All Jesus' ministry is a healing ministry, and we have heard one episode in the reading from John. Healing – not medical cure, but salving, relieving, coming to terms with, accepting, feeling at peace, being liberated from guilt, living in the moment. Every Christian encounter should be a healing encounter, freeing people from regrets in order that they can live with joy and fulfilment. This healing is not dependent on obeying rules, but merely of recognising that God's grace is there for us when we ask. The Spirit surrounds us in the air we breathe: it passes deep into our lungs and into our bloodstream, suffusing all our tissues. We are being bathed in it.

And bathing is a good analogy, for so often in Scripture, God's healing is seen in terms of healing water cleansing and giving life and beauty to a barren landscape. See this service as exactly that: imagine relaxing into a warm bath. Bathe in the candles, the warmth of the atmosphere, the friendship and companionship of us here. Acknowledge your sense of loss, and accept it. Give your grief over to the beauty of the sounds and sights. As you bring up the candles, hand your loved ones over. Hand over any feelings of regret, of loss. Better than continually picking at the scars. Bring all your emotions: joy at your memories, sadness at unfinished business, regrets about what you can't set straight, and lay them down with your candles, let go of them, and see them rise to heaven with the flames of love that you have lit. Then take back to your seats and your lives the joy and gratitude for their lives, the part of them that remains with you in happiness, so that you can move on in life.

And let us all take this opportunity, having laid down our burdens, to determine to live the rest of our lives in love and delight so that when we die, as we surely will, we ourselves will have no regrets.

Their souls are at rest with God, healed from earthly troubles. We will soon hear the anthem: *the spirits and souls of the righteous are in the hands of God where no torment can touch them* and as the sound wraps around you, you might recall the words said at the funerals: Go forth upon your journey from this world, in the name of God the father; in the name of Jesus Christ: in the name of the Holy Spirit; in communion with the blessed saints, and aided by angels and archangels, and all the armies of the heavenly host.

Sisters and brothers, all I ask you to do is bask like whales in the sea of divine love, healing divine love. Imagine yourselves dancing with the souls of those you have lost in the words of Ursula Vaughan Williams

Sing for your loves of heaven and of earth,
in words of music, and each word a truth;
that with your choiring angels we may share,
a word to light us thro' time-fettered night,
water of life, or rose of paradise,

so from the earth another song shall rise
to meet your own in heaven's long delight.

Amen