

# All Souls Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

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Teach us so to number our days. That we may apply our hearts to wisdom. (Ps. 90:12)

All Souls is a time when we sit quietly for a little while with the reality of death. Death of someone or ones we love, and the reality of our own death.

The first time I can remember thinking about death was when I was about 8 years old. It came about when my mother showed me a photo of a girl about my age, a girl I'd never met, called Elsa. My mum said that Elsa had died, and I remember staring at the photo and feeling very sorry for Elsa. As we looked at a photo together, my mother said that God had spared Elsa the sufferings of this world. This wasn't something that I had expected to hear from my mum – she wasn't a very pious person.

I remember feeling outraged. Could she possibly think that being spared suffering was enough reason to make sense of Elsa's death?

In retrospect I admit that maybe mum could really have thought that— her own experiences of life, wartime, being displaced, may have led her to hold that view. Or maybe it was the answer she had been given as a child. I couldn't accept that there could be any logic to this girl's death – a girl I had never met, but one who was probably just like me. After all, if there were logic to it, by that logic, God might want to spare me too, and I wasn't going to agree to that.

Mum was trying to define death as a friend. But I wasn't going to see it that way. I wanted no such friend.

St Francis of Assisi, in his Canticle of the creatures, Brother sun and sister moon, says something similar:

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Death, from whom no-one living can escape.

Francis invites us to view death as friend, even as our sister. We all have known someone who has reached the point where they are wanting to embrace death as friend. That's the meaning of the word 'euthanasia': good and welcome death.

St Paul, by contrast, sees Death as enemy (1 Cor. 15:26): 'The last enemy to be destroyed is death'.

The Book of Job is on this side of the ledger, too. Job gives a pretty bleak look at mortality. It's a passage full of questions about what hope there is if everything ultimately ends in death. Job 'numbers his days' and 'applies his heart to wisdom', but at this point in his story, everything seems absurd and futile. The experience of our own mortality can invite us to ponder what really matters in life, or it can leave us feeling very alone, whether there is any meaning to be found at all.

So we have both insights as part of the tradition: death as friend, and death as enemy. We experience both perspectives at times: death as friend, death as enemy.

My mother herself died within two years of that talk, and before a further year had passed, my father died as well. My sister and I were still at Primary School, and we had no family in Australia. As a child, their deaths were the end of my world.

My memories of this time are of fear and also courage, grief, lots of discussion about where we would now live, and a certain isolation that descends when your peers are no longer on the same page as you are. God was present too. Because we were not allowed to view dad's body nor attend the burial,

probably for fear of what the grief might evoke in us, any talk about God was held at arm's length. In the end, my sister went to live with our next door neighbors.

And I eventually went to live with a family a few doors away that was newer to our community – a Churches of Christ family with three daughters.

Mum and dad's death was the biggest challenge to my faith that I had ever had or would ever have; how could a loving God let that happen?

John's Gospel weaves a mysterious picture of death, judgement and eternal life. These are images we often associate with the future, but here we are told that these are already at work here and now. 'Very truly I tell you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.' This eternal life is not some future disembodied existence, but life that we're invited to participate in here and now. We are invited to enter into the life of God, described here as the love of the Father and the Son, which makes space for us.

For my eleven year old self, and for me today, I found that invitation into a life that crosses the boundaries to be compelling. I can't explain how, but in the darkest of places, I sensed the loving presence of God.

Death is real. It's the consummate expression of what it is to be human: our creatureliness, our mortality. But death is not the point of it all; life in relationship with the infinitely loving God is the point.

As Jesus says later in this Gospel: I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

Jesus models a particular type of life: It's about living a life of generosity and compassion. It's a life that sits lightly to itself, not constantly worrying about preserving

what we will ultimately lose anyway. This sort of life also has something to say about our attitude to our self, our personhood, our soul. Our life, our soul, is found in service: those who put all their effort into preserving their life, their personhood, will lose it. After all, death will be the end of it. But those who voluntarily surrender it, will find that it is caught up in the very life of God.

There are many biblical streams of thought which reflect on death: death as friend, death as enemy. Maybe tonight we can ponder death as a horizon that reminds us to reflect on what really matters. And if we can do so with the sense of God's loving embrace, death ultimately holds no power over us.

Teach us so to number our days. That we may apply our hearts to wisdom. Amen.