

All Souls' 2025:

Wisdom 3:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; John 11:21-27

I recently unearthed a school essay, written when I was eight years old, all about being a Cub Scout. I was slightly appalled to read that the highlight of the entire scouting year was a Halloween party where we had to eat doughnuts off a string. More piously I should say that in that era it was also a given that we went to Church Parade once a month. It seems extraordinary now that once a month all the uniformed organisations would parade down the street and pack the church out for their own service.

There was a point when being a Scout was considered to be a way of living out your Christian life. I don't quite buy into the notion that Almighty God dictated the original ten Scout laws to Robert Baden-Powell, the founder, in the same way as the ten commandments were delivered to Moses, but it is fascinating how many clergy, laymen and lay women, who were part of the Catholic revival of the Church of England, were keen on Scouting. One day I hope to finish a short book on Scouting and Walsingham to tell the story of how long before the Children's and Youth Pilgrimage groups of Cubs and Scouts were going on pilgrimage.

My first ever visit to Walsingham was in 1990 with my school class and I remember going inside the replica of the Easter tomb and another boy tried to shut me in with the large round pretend stone, which was movable in those days. It amused me to find in a memoir of the 1930s that a Cub Pack leader had banned all his Cubs from going in there, because they had been doing exactly

the same thing. These days the stone is fixed, so all temptation is removed.

Traditional Scouting was intended to keep you on the right path and away from temptation. On church monuments, to early Scout leaders, you will often find woven into the design the Going Home sign, used at the end of a completed trail. It is a circle with a dot in it to show that the trek has finished and you are now home. In a church context the point is that the deceased trusted in the promises of Christ that He has gone on ahead to prepare a place for us for He is the resurrection and the life. That hope is what we are celebrating on All Souls as we continue to commend all the dearly departed into the peace of God.

If you visit the catacombs of Rome, the place of burial for the early Christians, they are full of faith. The walls are covered with Latin inscriptions such as 'peace be with you' or 'may your spirit rest in peace'. Achieving peace is something we have to work at on life and it seems utterly reasonable that we have to be equipped for the peace of God as we pass through the gate of death. This House has a portrait of the late Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, who once had a robust exchange with the slightly more Evangelical Bishop Tom Wright. Bishop Rowell asked Bishop Wright if he felt he would be ready to see God when he died. 'No' he replied, 'but God will change us in and through our dying.' 'Ah' said Bishop Rowell, 'you do believe in purgatory then, but you think it is death, and I think it may take a little longer.'

Beyond death, of course, we are outside the material world and therefore time ceases to exist. 'Today' you will be with me in paradise' says Christ to the penitent thief on the cross, but St Paul's letter to the Thessalonians suggests a moment when all

come before the throne of God at the same time. All we can say is that we trust in the promise that as Christ was raised from the dead so those belonging to Him will share with Him in a comparable resurrection.

We need to accept that to come into full communion with the peace of God is going to be a spiritual experience. It is difficult to describe any clear process or sequence, but we know that it will be a work of the Holy Spirit. We had that lovely passage from the Wisdom of Solomon, which spoke of the ‘souls of the righteous’ being in ‘the hand of God’ and how ‘as gold in the furnace he has tried them.’ One of the biblical images of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit is that of fire, but here we are to think of the burning power of Love which seeks to transform and change. Just think of Charles Wesley’s hymn Love Divine, which speaks of the transforming power of such love. Changed from glory into glory, Till in heaven we take our place, Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love and praise.’

We might also take the image of water, which again and again is used in the history of salvation to signal the passage to a new and better reality. The Israelites pass through the Red Sea to safety and cross the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Jonah, that type of the resurrection, passes through the waters of death until he spends three days being purged inside the whale and turning totally to God. Water, of course, is used in baptism to wash away original sin and to give us new life in Christ. St John Henry Newman drew upon that image in his famous poem *The Dream of Gerontius* where the departed soul is immersed in a lake to be cleansed by God.

In Oxford I suspect you may feel that you hear too much about C.S. Lewis, but I still feel his novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* offers a very powerful symbol of the process of purgation through water. King Caspian has achieved peace in his kingdom and can now go on a sea voyage. Lewis clearly intends us to think of that voyage as entering into a new dimension as the crew travels closer towards the divine. Not everyone on that voyage is remotely ready for that vision. The boy Eustace is not only selfish but can only see the world in technical and analytical ways since he has no imagination. He reaches a low point when his greed sees him transformed into a dragon, but it also marks the start of his healing. Eustace starts to let go of his grudges, to forgive others for perceived wrongs and drops the daft ideas he has picked up in life. Then he is prepared for a healing bathe in a well, by the Lion Aslan who tears deeply and painfully into the dragon hide, so that Eustace feels he has gone right into his heart. The only thing that made Eustace able to bear the pain of the removal of all the thick and knobby dragon skin was the pleasure in feeling it peel off as he became outwardly the boy he once was, but inwardly a much better version of himself.

All Souls reminds us that we are all called to live one day with our entire being transfigured in a way that is so much more beautiful than anything we can possibly dream or imagine. For it is God himself who will grant us this future as like a Good Scout we go home at the end of the earthly trail. In our prayers for all souls, we are caught up in the work of Christ, which is to reconcile all things to Himself. In such prayer we touch the edge of a great mystery for as St Paul writes, quoting Isaiah; Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love him.'