

All Saints and Remembrance Day 2020.

The Reverend Ruth Hulse

Revelation 7: 9-end and Matthew 5: 1-12

“Remember Remember the 5th of November”

“At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them.”

We have come to the season of the year, and the Church calendar when we remember. We remember the fallen, we remember history, we remember those we have loved and lost.

This year it feels even more significant: we have been sending out and hanging up doves in memory of those whose funerals we have taken this year, because we are not able to gather physically together to remember. The response has been one of gratitude that we are remembering and are offering a way for those left to remember. And many people *have* responded.

There will also be many remembering loved ones who died during the lockdown or Covid restrictions, those who died of the virus, those who were mourned at the funeral by just a few, those who died of other causes, but knew the effects of restrictions just the same, those who died alone.

This year, we remember those who died whilst trying to make dangerous journeys to what they hoped would be a better life, those remembering the victims of the recent attacks in France, the victims of the earthquake in Turkey and Greece, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor... and many more.

And of course, as we remember those who gave their lives for our future in the World Wars, there will also be many remembering those who have died in other world conflicts more recently.

Remembering in 2020 feels very significant, and not only as people remember those who have died, but also as they remember a time when they were financially secure, when the future looked more certain, when life was more certain.

And here we are, the Church, the Body of Christ, claiming we have a gospel of hope. So we need to ask ourselves what is our hope, where can we find hope today, and perhaps even more importantly, what is the hope that we can offer to those who feel hopeless? Probably even more so after the announcement at the weekend and the impending lockdown.

Revelation 7 says,

“and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”

In this passage from Revelation, we are offered beautiful words describing a time and place beyond what we now know, a place

- where the whole world will gather and join together in song and where we will be washed clean,
- where hunger and thirst will no longer hold sway,

- where there will be shelter from all that would harm,
- where the very water of life will sustain us,
- and where God himself will wipe away our tears.

Sounds wonderful doesn't it? Well, I've always thought so, and then not long ago I was talking about this idyllic place to someone who isn't a Christian, but likes to talk about faith and God, and engage in lively discussion about it. And this person turned to me and said, "well, yeah, it sounds wonderful, except if it's this place of no more hunger, pain or sadness, why are we still crying?"

Oh, well that's a very good point, isn't it! If this place is perfect, why do we still have tears, why do we still cry? Why would God need to wipe away our tears in such a glorious place of no suffering?

I thought about that question for a long time. I didn't want to just dismiss the question as too difficult. Neither did I want to give a neatly packaged answer that had no depth or thought behind it. I wanted to wrestle with it until I could reach for an answer that sat with the gospel of hope we proclaim.

And it was that word 'hope' that drew me to form a conclusion, be able to articulate what *I thought* John might be pointing to in his vision of God reaching out and wiping away every tear from their eyes. You might have other thoughts, and I would be interested to know them so do let me know!

But here are my thoughts:

Anyone who has wiped the tears away from the face of another person, or has had their own tears wiped away, will recognise what a tender, intimate act this is.

In order for this to take place, first there must be the recognition that there are tears falling; the person crying has been seen, and their emotion has been recognised. The two people need to be close together, standing within reach of one another. You couldn't wipe away those tears whilst socially distanced! There is trust there; we wouldn't usually let a stranger wipe our tears away; here there is a relationship, a knowledge of what has caused the other person this pain.

And then the act itself; reaching out, perhaps bending down if the person crying is not able to stand straight, bowed down by sorrow. There is a reaching out, a gentleness, perhaps using the thumb to wipe away the tears, leaving the fingers free to curve around the head, or using the whole closed hand in that intimate sweep across the cheek with the back of the fingers. A gentle touch that sees the person, knows the person and is responding to the person.

This year perhaps we are re-visiting how important touch is when it has been taken away from us for so long.

"and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"

This vision given by John, and the words of the beatitudes in Matthew's gospel, are words of hope, of situations being turned around, of healing.

If God is wiping away every last one of the tears from the eyes of those who have gone to stand with him, then perhaps this is a description of the final act of healing, begun in Jesus as he himself died on the cross for us, and completed when we stand before God and he wipes away every last tear.

Perhaps this is the hope that we can have for those whom we remember, and the hope we can offer others for their loved ones; that God's hand has wiped away every tear, every sorrow, every hurt, every pain, every grief, every regret, and they are left standing healed and whole.

And the hope for those who are left behind, remembering? That even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we do not need to fear any evil, for God is with us. The healer is with us, even now, even here.

Jesus has already begun that work of healing. He already offers us comfort in our sorrow, and every time we remember what he has done for us, we are invited to come to him and be healed that little bit more as we acknowledge that healing is a process that can take a long time, but that even now we are invited to bring all our grief, doubts, regrets, and all our hopelessness.

So in this season of remembering, we remember the Saints who have gone before us, we remember history which teaches us lessons, we remember the fallen, we remember victims and those who mourn, AND we remember Jesus and the healing that can be ours because of his death and resurrection;

“this is my body which is given for you, this is my blood which is shed for you, do this in remembrance of me.”

In Jesus there is healing for the broken, gentleness for the hurting, and hope for the hopeless.

So where is our hope as we, the Church, proclaim a gospel of hope? It is found in the words:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they *will* be comforted.”

here and now in this life.

And that when we reach that farthest shore, or commend our loved ones to that place, it is then that,

“God will wipe away *every* tear from our eyes”

and we will stand in that great multitude, with all the Saints, robed in white, our healing complete.

Amen