



Praying for the Dead

WHY DO we pray for the dead? Some Christians believe that, when people die, it is no longer possible to pray for them. Either they are already with God or they're not and nothing we say or do will make any difference. It's like praying for the arrival of the train at a station when it's already got there.

I think praying for the dead is not only helpful but necessary. For one thing, most of us, when we die, are very much 'unfinished business'. We are far from perfect. If heaven were filled with all that 'unfinished business', it wouldn't be heaven. Heaven is a place of perfection, for God himself is all-holy, unapproachable light and perfection. So when we die, the journey continues. The picture language of Purgatory might be helpful: it is only picture language and, like Christmas card pictures of angels, we may find it entirely unhelpful. But further growth in God's love is undoubtedly what awaits faithful Christians when they die. My own favourite image is the one in John Henry Newman's *Dream of Gerontius*: our journey towards heaven is slow, not because God is holding us at arm's length but because, when we glimpse the awesome splendour of his love, we are ashamed and want to hide, just as Adam and Eve in the Genesis story sought to hide from God.

Another reason to pray for the dead is because we still love them. You can't love someone without eventually wanting to pray for them and you can't pray for someone without eventually wanting to love them.

And here is the third reason: we believe in 'the Communion of Saints'. That's what the Creed says. Who are 'the saints'? They are literally God's 'holy ones' and together they – we – form one communion – or fellowship – of love. There are dead saints and there are saints who are alive and there are saints who have not yet been born. The resurrection of Jesus Christ conquers sin and death and, so within the Communion of Saints, there is no such thing as sin and death. We are one in praising God and we are one in supporting one another in prayer.

May the prayers of Our Blessed Lady and all God's holy saints, past, present and to come, support you and bring to the nearer presence of God all who have died within the communion of his love.

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