

Sermon – Fr Richard Peers SCP

All Saints', Blackheath

November 2nd 2011

All Souls' Day

The Victorians can seem very distant from us. Their world power status as rulers of the pink parts of the globe; their over cluttered houses so different from our minimalist tastes; the love of sentimental verse, art, music and literature and their near obsession with death.

In reality they are not far from us at all.

Queen Victoria was still on the throne when my grandmother was born. My great grandparents were born when her reign was but young.

The front room of my great grandmother's house, a terrace in Chesterfield in Derbyshire was the ultimate in Victorian chic: beautifully bound volumes of Dickens, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Chaucer. Pictures four high filling every available space and the room itself never in my memory used. According to my father it was only used for tea after funerals accounting for the black ribbons hanging from the mirror.

I have to say that I am a sucker for all things Victorian:

I rejoice in the pre-Paphaelites. Think Tennyson's In Memoriam one of the greatest poems ever written and am always glad to see a bit of Gothic revival architecture.

I'm also quite keen on their attitude to death. I am not at all convinced that it is unhealthy, obsessive, creepy or in any way strange.

In my second year at theological college we were obliged to attend a course on counselling. Now it is very easy to criticise all things to do with counselling and believe me there was much criticism of it among us immature seminarians.

As part of the course we had to write an account of an occasion in our childhood when we had been particularly happy. I described a Saturday afternoon when I was about seven, collecting conkers with my brother from the oak tree in the village church yard where we lived. As a family we went every Saturday to the churchyard to put flowers on my brother's grave. He had died two years earlier when I was five. He was buried just a few yards from at least a dozen members of my mother's family: great grandparents, their brothers and sisters and children. And on the other side of the church yard my father's family: his grandfather, great uncles and aunt's and so on.

As children we always loved our walk to the graveyard and back. Even now I try and visit it at least once a year, preferably at about this time of year when we pray especially for and with the dead.

Well I handed in my assignment to our counselling tutor and two days later I was summoned to the Principal's office. He passed me my marked assignment at the end of which the tutor recommended that as I had faced the quotes 'mental abuse of being taken regularly to a cemetery as a child' I clearly required counselling.

As I have said it is all too easy to criticise counselling; it is extremely important for many people and I now have a couple of counselling qualifications myself but I have to say that I think that one of the greatest gifts my parents have given me were those visits to my brother's grave. Sitting in that churchyard surrounded by the living and dead of my family I knew profoundly and deeply that I belonged; that I had a place in the universe; that I was part of the ongoing story and journey that is the gift of human life and death.

I knew because of the prayers we said that the dead are always with us and that we like them are held, although we cannot always see it in the loving embrace of God.

But I learnt much more than that. I saw in my parents that grief never ends. That the wounds of bereavement don't just cut deeply, they cleave the heart in two; they create a gap a loss that can never be filled. Later my mother would tell me that when David first died she didn't dare cry because she thought that once she started she would never stop. Instinctively I knew that when my father put on the recording of La Boheme and he wept at the death of Mimi he wasn't weeping for a fictional French girl but for his own loss and grief which he found so hard to talk about.

I learnt something of grief. It is always with us; we grieve when we cannot control our lives when we cannot have what we want; when our dreams and ambitions are unfulfilled; when the relationship; the child or the job we had though should be ours passes us by. This grief too never passes. And that's as it should be.

One of my favourite writers on the spiritual life is the Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa: he calls this grief 'the genuine heart of sadness'. When we have this heart we are not afraid that losing people, things or status will destroy us. We know that we will be irrevocably changed by loss but that change is also an irrevocable part of life; that in every moment of our lives we are losing the moment that is passing; that every night the day has passed and every new year we say goodbye to the last.

The Victorians had it write, melancholy is a part of life it is the deep tone that gives flavour and richness to every day and helps us to savour each moment.

Speaking to my now 80 year old mum this weekend I was once again surprised at her happiness as she and my dad set off on their latest Mediterranean cruise. In her loss she learnt to be grateful for all that has been, that grief and loss cannot wipe away what is good.

She reminded me of a poem that I have always treasured by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

Here's how one verse goes:

O, tell us poet, what do you do? - I praise.
 but those dark, deadly, devastating ways,
 how do you bear them? - I praise.
 And the Nameless, beyond guess or gaze,
 How do you call it, conjure it? - I praise.

In the deadly dark devastating ways our hearts are broken; they are softened and they expand so that we no longer love only ourselves but have room enough for others.

In the early days of the church the Eucharist was celebrated on the graves of the martyrs. The dead were at the table too. As we celebrate our Eucharist we do so with the living and the dead. As we praise the one who is beyond guess or gaze but for us Christians has the name Jesus we will find that no matter how deep and hard the grief, no matter how deadly or devastating we can bear it and we can praise.

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 but those dark, deadly, devastating ways,
 how do you bear them? - I praise.

And the Nameless, beyond guess or gaze,
How do you call it, conjure it? - I praise.

That is the genuine heart of sadness