

All Souls 2021

Of all the characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, The Pardoner it seems gets a very bad press. The Pardoner's Tale is largely a long sermon on the sins of gluttony, lust, murder, perjury and avarice amongst many others which ends very poorly for three young scoundrels. He then goes on to describe his remedies for sin. He is portrayed as a travelling salesman proffering all kinds of religious artefacts and relics, offering remission for sin for any who are prepared to kneel before him to receive absolution and pay for it. It could be argued that this kind of thinking about forgiveness is one of the issues that lie at the very heart of the religious turmoil that swept across Europe in the 1500's and in which we find the seeds of the Anglican Communion.

From that time there has been reticence about this commemoration, which I think is great shame. There is no doubt that there was much to criticise in the pre Reformation Church in matters of sin, forgiveness and what we might expect of life beyond this earthly one. But in our reticence we have lost something of what it is to be Church in its broadest sense.

There is no doubt that in the gospels we experience the forgiveness of God through the person of Jesus. I for one am comforted by that vision because of the way that Jesus exercises forgiveness. This power of forgiveness is then passed bequeathed to us, it is of the essence of the Church. The resurrected Jesus appearing in the upper room breathing the spirit of forgiveness onto his disciples and commanding them to do likewise. You received without payment, give without payment.

In John's account of the Last Supper, Jesus offers the sop of bread only to Judas. The sign of love and friendship was offered to the one who would betray him. Dare we suggest that Judas had received forgiveness even before his act of betrayal? Why this talk of forgiveness? Much of this evening's celebrations have in time past centred on seeking forgiveness for those who have gone before us. Is this possible? Some texts hint at this, but I think there is much more to be said.

Our celebration of the Eucharist in the present projects us back to the Last Supper, we are gathered with the twelve, in all their confusion and worry about what is to happen, their astonishment at Jesus words, take this and eat it this is my body. Is this not us? But it also projects us forward to the wedding feast of the Lamb where we gather not only with the twelve but with all those who have gone before us and those who will come after us. This is where we are perfected in our communion one with another, a communion we glimpse, albeit perfectly, here.

It is here at the altar according to John's vision that we gather as one. It is a communion so perfect that our prayers for one another transcend all bounds. Those who have gone before us, those who passed on to us the gift of life and brought us to the font and altar for the bestowal of new life, are one with us. They are swept up in our prayers for ourselves and for all people. As Hebrews tells us their lives are perfected in ours and so on, until the fulfilment of all things.

I wonder too if our prayers encompass those yet to come. Perhaps we need forgiveness from them as we dwell upon our stewardship of this creation bequeathed to us.

So we remember this evening, we remember those gone before us, those whose memories are dear to us, and those known only to God because we are one with them. The mystery of the Church is just that, and it will remain so until we are all gathered, all made one, and until that time it is right and good that we pray for one another. Amen.