

Surrounded by Love
Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12:1-4
All Saints Sunday
November 5, 2006

The Dead

The dead are always looking down on us, they say,
while we are putting on our shoes or making a sandwich,
they are looking down through the glass-bottom boats
of heaven
as they row themselves slowly through eternity.

They watch the tops of our heads moving below on earth,
and when we lie down in a field or on a couch,
dragged perhaps by the hum of a warm afternoon,
they think we are looking back at them,

which makes them lift their oars and fall silent
and wait, like parents, for us to close our eyes.

■ Billy Collins [Sailing Alone Around the Room](#)

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God – our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

How fitting that we celebrate All Saints Day with an unquestionably powerful choral piece and a simple meal. Music and food – the stuff of heaven, the delight of earth. This great feast day of the Church may well cause tears to tabernacle in the eye or a breath to catch in the throat. As we remember family and friends who have died this past year, those tears may still be hot and ready, the next breath tight. Sadness and grief may, indeed, be higher for some of us but may the greater part of worship be that of thanksgiving and silence “*since we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses.*” Yes, this is our acclamation, this is our joy today – that we are surrounded by love, our beloved delighting in us, cheering us on in the race set before us this day, this hour.

Could we doubt that as we rest in the powerful beauty of John Rutter’s *Mass of the Children*? The blend of adult singers with the central part of children’s voices, the twining of soprano and baritone soloist, the mix of Latin text and English poetry, the Mass beginning with the fresh sweet voice of children singing a morning hymn and concluding with an evening hymn, the progression from waking to sleeping, a whole day wrapped up – all these unexpected seamless interweavings of contrast shakes the shimmery veil that seems to blow this morning between the living and the dead.

English critic and novelist Aldous Huxley said, “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.” In March 2001, Rutter’s son,

Christopher was tragically killed. A computer whiz and chorister at Clare College, Cambridge (his father's alma mater), Christopher was hit by a car while crossing the street in front of the college chapel where his father was choir master. *Mass of the Children* received its premiere in Carnegie Hall, February 2003, almost two years to the month after the boy's death. Rutter conducted the premiere performance.

"How miserably things seem to be arranged in this world," Lincoln wrote on the occasion of a good friend's departure from Illinois for Kentucky. "If we have no friends we have no pleasure; and if we have them, we are sure to lose them, and be doubly pained by the loss." It hardly seems worth the effort to love and be loved when we will be "doubly pained." But we do not grieve as those without hope for we are surrounded by the saints looking upon us with eyes glimmering with love and sigh with us in the holy breath of silence. So this day we sing, we give thanks, we call their names, we wait, we share a meal together.

Throughout the world, and throughout the centuries, people have been remembering the dead and celebrating their lives in a variety of ways. Common to every culture is the presence of food, especially sweets and specialty dishes. The people of Latin America are renowned for celebrating their All Saints Day or Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) with a bounty of food. Families gather in the cemetery to place on the grave all the dishes particularly pleasing to the dead. Food and drink are needed, you see, for strength to make the journey from the dead to this memorial celebration of life. There, in the glow of countless candles, family and friends tell stories about their loved one, sing songs, and together the living and the dead share a meal with one another.

This morning, we do not bring food for the dead. Rather bread of finest wheat and wine of sweetest grape is brought to us by the Living One, so that we may wake up from our slumber of mortality to truly live. The Risen One invites us to come to a table, not a grave, and sets before us the Bread of Heaven, the Cup of Salvation – holy, delectable food and drink to sustain us for our journey from death into life. This is the Table of pure welcome and hospitality – a Table with sides so broad and wide, time and space, height and depth no longer separate the living and the dead. There is a place at the Table for us. There is a place in the heart of God for you and all. The saints, who surround us now, and always, are waiting for us to come to the Table, to eat and drink with them. They have so much to tell us about what it's like to be fully alive. They eagerly want us to taste and see all that God has prepared for us all along the way, now and eternally.

With anticipation, may it be so!

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