

# Along the track

## Those Who Have Gone before

November is the month when we remember 'those who have gone before', 'those who have died in the peace of Christ,' those 'whose faith is known to You alone'. During November we remember with love and gratitude the lives of those who have died and, in that recalling, they go on living in us. We are still connected – they with us and we with them. It is the time when the hope of resurrection takes on a more personal meaning. November is a reminder to look again at the gift of life with a more thoughtful and wiser eye.

None of us likes to think about death or talk about it unless we have to. We'd rather focus on living. Avoiding thoughts of death is not unhealthy – it's pretty normal. Death can seem so cruel, so purposeless at times. In the words of the song, *After the Storm*:

Well I guess I'll just go home,  
Oh God knows where.  
because death is just so full  
and man so small.  
Well I'm scared of what's behind  
and what's before.\*

In reality we don't know a lot about what it is like to die, let alone what happens after we die. It remains in the realm of mystery. Sometimes we don't even like to utter the word – people pass away or are at rest, crossed over, gone to a better place. It is no wonder that we can be afraid or apprehensive of dying, of what lies beyond as death is a journey into the unknown, we cannot even imagine what it must be like, what eternity may mean or even the unimaginable joy we sometimes struggle believe that is involved.

When a loved one dies, a part of us dies too. Our life will never be quite the same. We mourn the loss, we are saddened that we will not hear their voice or see them again in this life. Nothing can take away from that and, although time may diminish the sting we feel, surely love is meant to wound us in that way. Isn't that a consequence of love?

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it: *"Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love. . . . It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, God keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain. . . . "The dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift in themselves."*

November is the time, however, when that part of us comes to life again when we remember past times together, when we recall how they live on in us and other loved ones in the habits and memories and the lessons, the expressions they gifted us.

Someone close to me died suddenly this year. One sympathy card said: *Wherever he goes, you go also; he will not be alone.* I don't know what that really means but I would like to believe that it is true. Surely death does not sever all connections. It is not the end. The custom of praying for the dead during November reminds us that, at the very least, we connect again in a profound way by our prayers for them before God. Spiritual writers over the centuries have used the expression 'we are always in the mind of God'. God knows us, our thoughts, our desires, our loves, our hates. When we pray for those we love who have died, it is not just that we want God to stay mindful of them, we want to stay mindful of them too and that they would be mindful of us. Isn't that part of what the Communion of Saints means?

Death reminds us to live life fuller rather than faster, to appreciate the gift of time, our own and our time with those around us. It calls us to stop, to take time, to rejoice and enjoy the world, to appreciate the company of others, to pay attention to our friends, to take the time to appreciate the gifts of nature around us, to care for the earth, to rejoice in the rain and the cold and the wind as well as the warmth and sunshine. In November, when we remember those who have died, in the northern hemisphere where this custom originated, winter is approaching – there is a lot of 'shutting down' in nature and light itself diminishing as the days grow shorter and there is less and less sunlight. November reminds us to be alert to the rhythm of the seasons and their messages and to remember "the light that no darkness can take away."

November calls us to a life where apathy and indifference play no part, a life where our concern for others will find a place in us each day. November reminds us that everything we do in life, every deed we ever do lives on somewhere in someone who remembers it.

November also reminds us:

And there will come a time,  
you'll see, with no more tears.  
And love will not break your heart,  
but dismiss your fears.  
Get over your hill and see  
With grace in your heart  
and flowers in your hair\*

I don't have a lot of hair left to put flowers in these days but I like the message. It reminds me of these words:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. Rev 21:4.

\*After the Storm Mumford & Sons

Regards  
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