

# All Souls 2021

## A homily from the Chaplain



*“The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God.”*

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled...*

*in my father’s house there are many dwelling places,  
and I go to prepare a place for you.”*

These words from our readings are full of hope, full of promise.

They are words that have brought comfort to generation upon generation, for hundreds, even thousands, of years. They speak to that profound human need for a place of safety and belonging.

As human beings we look for ways to belong. Places to call home, where our very existence is cherished and treasured unconditionally. The reading from the Book of Wisdom speaks of God’s tenderness, holding us gently through all our life and most gently of all at the hour of our death. In the gospel of John Jesus speaks of heaven as a place with many dwelling places, in which there is a special place set aside for each of us since before we were born: a place where we can be welcomed just as we are and dwell for all eternity in the household of God.

It is a St Catharine’s tradition that on this day we remember before God the names of those Members of this College who have died during the past year. This year, after the pandemic prevented us meeting in 2020 we have two years’ of precious names to read. Two years’ of names to treasure and to cherish in this place that was special to each of them. It is good that today we are able to welcome some of their nearest and dearest whether in person, or online.

Belonging matters. Membership of a College is a lifelong affinity, reflecting the profound impact that being part of a community such as this has on people’s lives as they pass through it, whether for just a few years as a student, or for longer as a Fellow. It also reflects the profound impact that each of these people have made on this community both during their time here and in the many ways in which they have kept in touch with the College afterwards.

Each year this community reinvents itself, but it does so building on the gifts and memories and values of past generations. Everyone who comes through those gates leaves an imprint on this place: we leave something of ourselves behind and we take something of St Catharine’s with us.

The College Collect puts it so beautifully:

*“O God for whom a thousand years are but as one day*

*and in whose name are treasured here the memorials of many generations...”*

This place treasures its people. We seek to care for and cherish each new cohort of students. And this service is also an act of care and cherishing for those Members of the College who have departed this life. It is an occasion on which we are able to articulate our hope and trust that just as they belonged here so also they now belong in the household of God and the peace of heaven.

This evening the words and the music, the candles and the silence, and the solace of community with one another are all here to help us to place these precious children of God into God's loving hands, confident in the promise of Jesus Christ that he would prepare a place for each of us.

And that death, the last great enemy, has been overcome: As the choir will sing in a moment,

*Death, where is thy sting,  
grave where is thy victory?'*

But in grief our hearts are troubled.

It is a human reality that faith may bring us hope, but it does not erase our pain, and that love comes at a cost: a cost that we bear most acutely when those we love are taken from us, whether after a long and full life or far too soon. There is room in God's heart for us, in all our grief and pain and anger, and the complexity of emotions that overtake us when someone dies.

And so in the stillness of this evening, we pray for peace:  
for the peace of heaven to surround our departed loved ones, and for the peace that passes all understanding to fill our own hearts and minds this night and always.

To end, some words of John Donne:

Bring us, O Lord God,  
at our last awakening  
into the house and gate of heaven,  
to enter into that gate  
and dwell in that house,  
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling,  
but one equal light;  
no noise nor silence,  
but one equal music;  
no fears nor hopes,  
but one equal possession;  
no ends nor beginnings,  
but one equal eternity:  
in the habitations of thy majesty and glory,  
world without end. Amen.