

In our Mass today we remember the faithful departed – those who have gone before us. As we do so, we might recall people we have known personally. We might remember a father or mother who has died, a husband or wife, other members of our family, people who were good friends. Their passing can leave a kind of emptiness within us.

The Scriptures recognise the sorrow we feel when someone we love dies. But they also offer us hope in the midst of our sadness. Today's commemoration of the departed invites us to pray for those who have died, that they might be blessed with a new life, an eternal life of peace and joy.

One of the prayers we draw from our Christian tradition is very simple. We pray, "May they rest in peace." In the context of a funeral service, this prayer has an immediate sense as we take a loved one to their resting place. As we begin the journey to the graveside, the priest says to the congregation: "In peace let us take them to their place of rest." There is a beautiful tenderness in seeing a funeral as a "laying to rest". We lay our loved one to rest, as one might gently lay a child down to rest in the evening. But this is not all. Our Christian faith sees death as a kind of sleep. We speak of those who have died as "sleeping in Christ". And, according to our faith, it is a sleep from which they will awaken! Just as Christ woke from death to a glorious resurrection, so too, we pray, will those who have died. As we gather at the graveside, we pray: "Lord Jesus, grant that this one we love may sleep here in peace until you awaken them to glory, for you are the resurrection and the life." This is one beautiful meaning of the prayer, "May they rest in peace". "May they sleep peacefully till they rise to glory".

I would also like to note another beautiful meaning in the phrase "may they rest in peace". In this further sense, "rest" does not refer to the rest of a peaceful sleep. Rather it refers to the kind of rest we might associate with a refreshing holiday. It's like the "rest" that God enjoyed when the work of creation had been completed. It was not a going to sleep but a relaxing and a rejoicing in the goodness of creation. The Book of Genesis says: "God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good . . . and God rested on the seventh day." (Genesis 1:31-2:2)

The Scriptures speak of a future place of rest in which people will share in the joy of God's own seventh day rest. This is eternal rest in a very positive sense, resting in everlasting light, happiness and peace. To rest in this sense is not so much sleeping undisturbed. It is rather to be fully awake and enjoy the refreshment of everlasting communion with God.

In the gospel, Jesus addresses those who are weary and are longing for rest. He invites us to find our rest in him. "Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) The rest that Jesus is speaking of is the kind of rest we have when we're with a very good friend. We can be at ease with them. We can be at peace in their company.

In our Mass today we pray for all those who have died. May they find eternal rest in Christ. May Jesus draw them to himself. May they find rest in his company as people find rest in the company of a dear friend. We pray: Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.