

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 2nd November 2018, All Soul's
Romans 8:38-39, John 6:37-40*

Held Safe

Alison Hobbs

We are in November, in the season of remembrance. When the autumn sun shines kindly on us, its hard to believe its November but its been dark for over two hours – nearly three hours, already. We've gathered tonight to remember those we have lost, those we love and see no more; needing to know that we and they are safe and held by Christ and his Church, now and always.

For some of us, the loss is still a sharp, new loss that catches us out: we measure the time its been in small bites: counting first in days, then weeks and months: a painful awareness of the small steps through grief and re-building. Its been dark for over two hours.

For others of us, its a mellowed grief, we look back in surprise; its been dark nearly three hours.

Each person travels through grief differently but the experience of death as loss is universal.

Of course it is, because we no longer have the physical warmth and solidity of them, they've gone, leaving only shadows and memories to talk to and hold.

We talk about loss of our loved one; being at a loss; being lost in grief, being lost ourselves.

Today's readings speak strongly into the place of loss and grief, assuring us that we are immensely held.

Held in God's love.

Held by Christ who will never let us go.

In that last reading, Jesus is telling the crowds that he has come from God so that all who ask will be held safe, now and for eternity. That's you and me, that's here and now. However dark, he will hold us.

He assures us that he will lose nothing – none of us; we are safe. He will lose none of our loved ones either, they too, are safe; he came down from heaven to assure us of this.

As a church family, we try to give this message through practical action in times of loss: there is a lot of holding and hugging, sitting with, and walking alongside that goes on. God holding us through each other's willingness to be Jesus' hands and feet; the body of Christ. Now we have another church symbol and means of holding, in the provision of a place for interring ashes, long-awaited.

Now, when we look up to the corbels and follow the theme of stages in our Christian journey: birth and baptism, confirmation, marriage and children perhaps, prayer and the close of life into death and resurrection, and move onward through the Paradise window, we are at the Circle of Remembrance. It is always in front of us as we worship, for we face East in expectancy of what is to come, and remember that those who are interred there, along with all who have died and been buried, are that much nearer now to what is to come.

We are invited to sit and become part of the circle, and in the peace and tranquillity of that spiritual place, remember that we are part of a great cycle of life, eternity, death and love. The three stone arcs that encompass the ashes and define the circle remind us that it is a Trinitarian God that loves and holds

us, and that we, too, made in his image are more than just body and spirit, we are complex, and enduring, by the mystery of his love and resurrection.

The circle is not complete; in its brokenness it reminds us of the forgiving nature of God and his gift of healing and wholeness that is reached through the pain of loving and losing.

The inscription that runs around the circle is taken from the reading we heard first: “... *Nothing can separate us from the love of God. ... neither present nor future ... neither death nor life ...*”

It doesn't matter which order we read them in, it doesn't matter in what mood, in what situation, be it of joy or sorrow, it affirms the unending holding of us in God's love.

Paul, writes that he is certain of this – our usual, the NRSV translation, says “*I am convinced!*”

“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Let the strength of Paul's conviction hold us to the truth if we doubt or waver. If we think death is the end, if we are lost in grief or drawn down into despair. Or simply flat, numbed, lacklustre and listless. Let that fierce conviction witness to the awesome truth, that God loves us and is never going to let us go, never go so far his love cannot reach us.

How far does his love stretch? It stretches beyond life, through death, and out the other side again into the new life at the last. It

stretches to take us to a time when he promises “I will raise them up on the last day.”

Jesus showed us what it might look like to be raised up on the last day. His resurrection three days after his death on the cross, testify to a strange yet familiar new life; a state with substance – and no substance; all spirit but recognisably embodied: not a ghost.

Jesus taught us through his own resurrection that we should try to grasp the reality of the promise he makes: that he is the resurrection.

That somehow, through belief in him, following his way, we will be taken through him to eternal life.

But just as much as we are to believe that he will raise us on the last day, to feast with all in some heavenly banquet, so we are to believe that eternal life extends back into our lives now.

Now is the start of the eternal life.

It is very much akin to eternal love.

Love and resurrection come together as we remember that
“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”

Here, love is resurrection.

Loving into new life.

We have to let go of our fears and trust to God’s promises, and in that letting go, we are given assurance of the enduring care, the never losing, the eternal life that we have entrusted our loved ones, and ourselves, to partake in.