

Welcome to all souls. For a significant number of you, this is a first: perhaps not the first time you've come, though it may be, but perhaps the first with a new bereavement that has not yet travelled the full calendar of annual events.

Those dreaded firsts: the first holiday with someone missing, the first birthdays they're not here for, the first wedding anniversary without the other half; the first family celebrations they are not part of, and soon, the first Christmas, and how is it to be managed?

How is it all to be managed?

Those who sit outside faith are liable to say the Christian message gives a cop-out from what is evident, real and final. That the Christian message is the easy and illusory sticking plaster for death and bereavement, the fairy story that wants a 'Happy ever after' for every ending.

That it is avoidance.

Is what is 'real' limited to what we can see with human eyesight?

Are measurable things the only things acceptable as evidence?

Is it really 'easier' for Christians?

If 'easier' means it doesn't hurt so much, or there are any less hurdles to be faced, then no, of course its not! If only that were an option we could subscribe to!

If 'easier' means more equipped, then yes, that could be a claim for Christians.

The Christian faith equips us with a living hope:

hope that there is more to come: a new life, mysterious, and beyond our understanding, for those that have died. A new life, beyond our imagination and expectations, for those who are left behind, grieving, a new life that does not deny the pain of loss but grows round it and despite it, through the grace of God.

The Christian faith equips us with an assuredness that what has been *our* job of holding, loving and taking care of the precious person that has died, is ongoing through Jesus: they are safe, at peace, and will know Jesus in a new and direct way.

It is a terrible loss to ourselves when a person who loved us and knew us through and through, and was always there for us, perhaps more than anyone else in the world, dies; what would we not give to avoid that loss? Without denying the reality of that, our faith equips us with an assuredness that we are loved and not alone, known through and through and loved: nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ, neither present nor future, neither death nor life. Those everlasting arms of God are never too short to reach us, no matter how lost we feel. How confused. How remorseful.

The Christian faith equips us with the grace of forgiveness: Jesus invites us to work through the unfinished business of our relationship with those who have died. Christ is the conduit for our need to know ourselves loved and forgiven, and, over time, he is able to shed new light on our perspectives, able to heal hurts, and free us of those burdens.

The Christian faith equips us with scripture that records these promises, and the evidence of God's good work from the beginning. So we have heard tonight Peter's testimony to that living hope that comes through Jesus's resurrection, that provokes us to love and joy and believing, here and now. And his testimony to the inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you – that mysterious life beyond death, and, ultimately, salvation of our souls.

Heck! What do we understand about salvation of our souls? Nothing! Though it is a wonderful promise, it doesn't get the new wheel on the car when we've got a puncture; or make the house smell of apple pie, or whatever the little things are that just undo you when you thought you were coping so much better. Its the unexpected sights and smells; the tasks we never had to do ourselves that point out how really alone we can feel.

Faith doesn't stop it being difficult; but it does make a difference. Because even when we feel most alone, we know the truth of ourselves as loved in Christ: the comfort of the footsteps poem, that reminds us we are carried when we cannot go on in our own strength.

Jesus does not want to add to our burdens like a demanding friend wanting attention when we most want to be left in peace. There is not a minimum requirement of tasks or prayers to keep us right.

Jesus invites us to just sit and be, whatever our emotion of the moment, with or without words, he listens, and puts new thoughts in our way, or we see something that changes how we look at things, or gives us reassurance. “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.” To want to want Jesus is enough right now. He loses nothing of all that we are, that our loved ones are, and promises to raise them up on the last day – them and us: thanks be to God!

*Amen*