

Things Consider

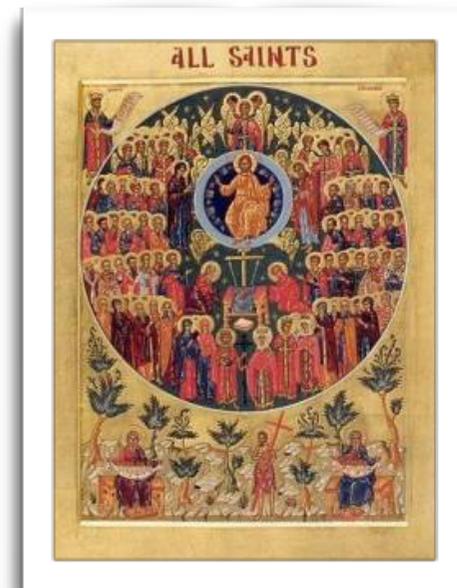
- ▶ As we consider those departed from this life they serve as reminders that one day we will join them. They serve to remind us of our own mortality.
- ▶ However, none of these reflections on the *communion of saints* should be done in a morbid sense but as one that is a reality check:
 - What is truly important to us in life?
 - What legacy will you leave behind?
 - Can you trust the goodness and love of God for you?
 - Think about those words in Romans (8.38-9) where Paul reminds us that neither death nor life shall separate us from the love of God. Summed up: living or departed we belong to God and nothing shall separate us from His love.
- ▶ Reflect upon those verses from Hebrews: 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ...' (12.1-2)
- ▶ And, if we turn our attention from ourselves to those who are departed:
 - Might you pray for them, offering them into God's loving care (as you would the living)?
 - If words don't come easily could you light a candle for them, even in your own home, as you pray? Candles can serve as reminders of God's presence and that Jesus said He is the Light of the World (John 8.12). They can also be a means of articulating that welling up from our heart which struggles to find the right words.
 - Another suggestion can be to have a small icon of one or more of the saints to serve as a reminder that we are never alone even when we think we are. We are always in the company of God and the communion of saints.
 - We ask other people at times to pray for us, so why not ask those who have gone before us to pray for us as well. [Note: we are not praying to them anymore than when we ask someone living to pray for us. We pray to the Father through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2.18); we are simply asking this other, whether living or departed, to support us with their prayers.]

AtG/B14/MBH

Attending to God

'The Communion of Saints'

Part 2



A story tells us that as he lay dying, the Russian philosopher of religion Prince Evgeny Trubetskoy's final words were, 'The royal doors are opening! The Great Liturgy is about to begin.' He was recalling that moment in the Eucharist at the end of the preparation when the doors in the centre of the icon screen (*iconostasis*) were opened revealing the altar. For Prince Evgeny death was the opening of a door into the nearer presence of God.

Death is the great equaliser for as Job (34.20) says, 'Even powerful rulers die in the darkness of night when they least expect it, just like the rest of us.' But for faithful Orthodox Christians like Prince Evgeny they saw their death-day like the early Christians did, as their birthday, as a new beginning.

In the previous brochure and in this one, I am focusing on the *communion of saints*, especially that great body of Christians who have gone before us and who now stand in the nearer presence of God. I am exploring that relationship we can choose to have with them, if we so wish.

But a question might now arise in your mind – What of those who have died rejecting God or who most people would regard as great sinners? Perhaps it's wise to say here that we are at this moment standing on the border of a great land that bears a sign which reads, as Kallistos Ware says, 'No trespassers'. Quite simply we are dealing with matters beyond our ability to comprehend or upon which we can utter no definitive answer.

Some passages that speak against a form of salvation that is genuinely for all are Mark 9.43, 47-48 (compare Isaiah 66.24); Matthew 25.41; Luke 16.26. Metaphors should not be taken too literally, but we do need to take them seriously.

On the other hand there are other passages that speak of the possibility of a form of salvation that is genuinely for all such as John 12.32; 1 Corinthians 15.22, 28; 1 Timothy 2.4.

We can speculate, but great humility is called for. Certainly we can find biblical verses to support either stance and the question becomes a psychological one for us: Why do we choose a particular stance and not the other?

Perhaps here Jesus might have the last word. He said in response to Peter, who had asked in a quite different context who could be saved, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible' (Mark 10.27).

Two things are certain: Repentance either now or then is a requirement. There is no getting around it. It is not something that is casually done but something that will touch the very core of our being to a degree that we cannot begin to imagine.

Second, to say that God cannot or will not forgive beyond death is to limit His love. It is to make God less than He actually is, for then in our mind, we can always imagine a God who is greater than the God of reality, which by definition must be impossible. And could you or I be truly happy in heaven knowing that a loved one of ours is not there?

I don't want to get side-tracked on this. Rather, my question to explore here is: Can we and should we pray for the faithful departed, that great band we know as the communion of saints?

There are those who would say that we can't for their fate is now sealed and our prayers can have no effect. But praying for our deceased loved ones is a very normal and natural thing to do. It is something that we just find ourselves wanting to do from the depths of our being. It almost seems to well up like a spring of water. As Edward Pusey, a nineteenth century Anglican scholar, said of refusing to pray for the departed: It is 'so cold a thought ... so contrary to love' that it must for that reason alone be considered false.

It is interesting that in the wake of World War I with vast numbers of deaths and when there was a general view among many, that you could not pray for the departed, the result was a steep rise in spiritualism. People wanted to and needed to have some outlet for their grief and this found expression in unhealthy ways in trying to communicate with the dead. But as Kallistos Ware reminds us, 'our meeting is not the seance-parlour but the Eucharistic table'.

We can find much evidence in the catacombs that the early Christians prayed for the dead, but there are only two passages in Scripture that point this way. The first is in the Apocrypha, in 2 Maccabees 12.40-46 and here it is quite explicit. The second passage is less so: 2 Timothy 1.15-18. It could be interpreted as Paul praying for the soul of Onesiphorus (v.18).

If we believe it important to pray for the living, then why not for the departed? After all, as Paul reminds us when speaking of his fellow Christians, '... whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.' (Romans 14.8) I believe our prayers are as important for the departed as they are for the living and the reason is these people will ever be important to you.