

Good Morning

Yesterday at the Cenotaph the Queen led the nation in homage to the fallen. Cenotaph, meaning an empty tomb, stands for all those who defended us to their death; and its emptiness signposts a hope that their death is not their end.

November is the season of dying. It begins with Halloween and moves on through All Souls and All Saints to the Act of Remembrance. Even nature adds its grieving voice in the cadence of falling leaves.

This is the month that brings us face to face with mortality.

You'll have heard it said the Victorians were coy about sex and obsessed with death, whereas we're preoccupied with sex and embarrassed by death. But from soap operas to TV Serials we seem to have a voracious appetite for killing and dying, the more mysterious the reason and the more gruesome the method the better.

And just this weekend the tokens of one of the most famous deaths of the 20th Century went on sale. Someone paid one hundred thousand dollars for the license plates of the Limousine in which President John F Kennedy was assassinated. Here's a culture that looks the Grim Reaper in the eye.

Our attitude to death shows in different ways. When a person's confronted by a difficult choice you'll often hear the advice of a friend, "Well, you only live once" or "You get just one shot at life". The gist of the advice is that you have to make the most of the here and now. There's little sense that what we do this side of the grave has any consequences for what might happen on the other side.

It's an issue that early Christians wrestled with in their souls especially when they were being brutally martyred. Why go through all that cruelty? Why not renounce your faith? It prompted St Paul to write that if for this life only we've put our trust in Christ then we of all people are most to be pitied. It was their faith in a life beyond that shaped the first Christians' attitude to death and how they then lived. Eternity gave them their ethos and their ethics.

In his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' W B Yeats wrote,

"An aged man is but a paltry thing,

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

Soul clap its hands and sing ..."

Whatever we believe about an afterlife, I believe it's the idea of a soul that spans the material and spiritual which can help us contemplate what truly happens when once the seed has fallen into the ground and died.

Bishop James Jones