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Passing from Death to Life (John 5. 19-29)

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Walking through the streets of Lyneham recently, I came across the startling sight of two upstretched hands and a ghoulish looking head apparently rising from the earth in a suburban garden. Large spider webs dangled from a nearby tree and a paper cut out skeleton adorned the front porch. Welcome to Hallowe'en, Canberra style! Two nights ago, as we were driving to the John Coleman concert here, we passed a band of children trick or treating, arrayed in black capes, witches' hats and white sheets. In my entire childhood, I remember only one episode of bobbing for apples in the back yard! Now, as with Valentine's Day, what seems a quintessentially American festival has been imported to the Australian calendar. Out of season pumpkins are carved into Jack O'Lanterns, parents are co-opted to accompany their roaming progeny at twilight, and leaflets are dropped in letter boxes in the days prior, helpfully reminding local residents to have chocolates and lollies at the ready. It seems a triumph of cross-cultural marketing and the manufacture of desire!

Yet, having said this, I wonder if the contemporary secularised celebration of Hallowe'en also expresses or reflects something true about our culture. It seems to suggest an ambivalent and essentially non-integrated relationship with death. In Hallowe'en costumes and decorations, the dead are depicted as both fascinating and repelling, and images of life beyond the grave give intimations of haunting and of unquiet spirits. In the exaggerated and transgressive celebration of Hallowe'en, it's as if there's social licence to play with death and the fear of death, with the macabre and supernatural. At one level, this is simply the spirit of carnivale. Kids love it and perhaps, psychologically speaking, it does what monster stories do – which is to enable the surfacing of fears and anxieties that would otherwise remain repressed. Even so, I wonder – does it serve our deepest need to integrate death with life?

In the Western Christian calendar, Hallowe'en or All Hallows' Eve is the night before All Saints' Day, which is itself followed by All Souls' Day. This three-day season – Allhallowtide – is the time in the liturgical year dedicated to remembering the dead, the saints or hallows first, followed by remembrance of all the departed in today's feast of All Souls. But whereas the secular celebration of Hallowe'en seems to trade on an enjoyably contained frisson of horror and dread of the departed, Allhallowtide celebrates the enduring relationship between the living and the dead. It's a season grounded in a vision of the oneness of reality in God, and it invites us – I think – into a qualitatively different experience of both life and death. And that's what I'd like to reflect on a little more.

Theologian James Alison has a favourite way of speaking about God as 'absolutely alive' and 'utterly vivacious'. God, he insists, 'knows not death' in the sense that God is in no way determined by death. God cannot be killed, God cannot be threatened; therefore, by definition, death has no dominion over God. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, says the psalmist. We, on the other hand, can be killed and we will die; death is for us the end of life as we know it and fear of death can become a driving and distorting force in our lives. Totalitarian regimes use the threat of death to compel compliance with the most profound falsehood and injustice. The fear of death and its proxies – suffering, humiliation, shame, isolation and condemnation – can cause any of us to betray our values, to cast out those who threaten us, to refuse solidarity with those whom others despise. According to Alison, the whole point of Jesus' witness, the point of his yielding himself trustingly to the world's condemnation and death was to 'create a belief in the absolute aliveness of God and [so] to empower us ... to act [like him] as if death were not, thus being set free from our compulsion to act out in a way governed by the kingdom of death'.¹

¹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p.139.

A recent example of this empowerment can be found in the prison diaries of Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who died in a Siberian prison earlier this year. Navalny wrote of actively working to come to accept the near-certainty of his own death. He spoke of a practice of lying on his bunk and saying to himself: 'I will spend the rest of my life in prison and die here. There will not be anybody to say goodbye to'. 'You need to think about this seriously', he wrote. 'The important thing is not to torment yourself with anger, hatred, fantasies of revenge, but to move instantly to acceptance. That can be hard'. But he went on, 'I have always thought, and said openly, that being a believer makes it easier to live your life and, to an even greater extent, engage in opposition politics. Faith makes life simpler'. 'It is not essential for you to believe some old guys in the desert once lived to be eight hundred years old, or that the sea was literally parted in front of someone. But are you a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price for their sins? Do you believe in the immortality of the soul and the rest of that cool stuff? If you can honestly answer yes, what is there left for you to worry about? ... My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. They won't let me down and will sort out all my headaches. As they say in prison here: they will take my punches for me'.²

It's important to say that being empowered to act 'as if death were not' in no way diminishes the terrible injustice of murder, war and premature death, or the waste of tragic accident and random illness; it's in no way to minimise the abyss of grief that can swallow us at the death of those we love and at the prospect of our own dying. It is, however, to come to trust that death by itself cannot separate us from the ultimate ground of our life. God is the Life that is not cancelled by, but encompasses, death. The 'Father has life in himself', is how Jesus puts it. In the Christian vision, this is the knowledge that's become available because of Jesus'

² This is drawn from [Patriot: A Memoir](#). Published in the print edition of *The New Yorker*, [October 21, 2024](#), issue, with the headline 'Prison Diaries'. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/10/21>

resurrection. When they looked back on his teaching, on his whole way of being in the world, the gospel writers came to realise that all along Jesus had been so joined by love to the life of God, that death could not contain him. Thus, those who are joined to him by this same love are similarly free. 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes' (John 5.21), says the Jesus of John's gospel. Anyone who entrusts themselves to him, writes John, already 'has eternal life, ... has passed from death to life'. Here and now, death is no longer determinative of their being.

And there's a further insight here. It's that the logic of God holds true. If the whole of reality is given by God, if, as St Paul puts it, 'nothing can separate us from the love of God' then, whether we're alive or whether we've died we're answerable in the same way to the crisis Jesus provokes, the judgement he reveals. According to the gospel, Jesus is the culmination of a long process of revelation; in him we see most clearly who God is and what Life requires of us, 'to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God' (Micah 6.8). Faced with Jesus, we are called to choose who and how we will be. Do we let him lead us in the way of truth, love and life? Or do we turn away from God and from one another, choosing the way of falsehood, hatred and death? This is a choice Jesus makes available to us not only in life, but in death – for death is as nothing to God. 'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live' (John 5.25).

Which brings us back to Allhallowtide and the remembrance of those who have died. At the heart of this season, it seems to me, is the recognition that in God we are one. One expression of this recognition in the Catholic tradition is in terms of the possibility of continuing mutual aid. Traditionally, on All Saints' Day, those who have died in a state of grace are asked to pray for the living; on All Souls' Day, the living are asked to pray for the departed, to aid their passage into the fullness of love and truth. Admittedly the notion of praying for the dead got somewhat corrupted by 'the various ways in which the late medieval Church made ... a cottage industry' out

of [saying masses for the departed], seeking (as Rowan Williams puts it) to secure ‘grace for souls in Purgatory by organised sacramental “lobbying” for them’ – appropriately paid for, of course!³ But there’s nevertheless a sound theological instinct here. In death as in life, we are members one of another, and to the extent that there is a continuing journey after death as we ‘become acclimatized to the fullness of love’, perhaps the prayers of the living may join the love and light of God in drawing the departed on.

Because, beyond the ghoulish depiction of the alienated dead in a secular Hallowe’en, All Souls’ Day speaks to the reconciliation of all things in the heart of love. For ‘Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For 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’ (Romans 8. 35, 37-39).

³ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 148-149.