

Soul Space

SERIES: REMEMBERING OUR DEAD

Season colour: GREEN

In this short series, Fr Brendan McConvery remembers the dead during the month of November.

WHAT IS PURGATORY?

Many people find Catholic teaching about purgatory confusing. The word 'purgatory' is not mentioned in the Bible, and popular preaching and devotion has not always given the best interpretation of what it means. A good place to begin might be in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. "The Church gives the name Purgatory to the final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire. As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth (Jesus) says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come."

Popular talk about purgatory has sometimes reduced it to a miniature version of hell – a place of punishment by fire and other torments with the only difference being that hell is forever, purgatory for a time. Popular talk also went on to calculate the length of time one might spend in purgatory. It usually agreed it was long – depending on the amount of sin, it might last for centuries or even for thousands of years.

THE OPTIMISM OF PURGATORY

The first thing about purgatory is that it is an optimistic teaching. It is the fruit of a Catholic theology of God's mercy and forgiveness that is generous. If a person dies who has not radically turned

away from God by deliberate mortal sin, then purgatory is an offer of the divine mercy. Since our concept of time ceases to have much relevance after death, we do not know how long purgatory will last. What does matter is that it is a final chance of radical cleansing.

I like to think about purgatory in two very human ways. Imagine first of all that you are invited unexpectedly to a grand party. You have been working at a messy job. Your clothes are dirty, your hands need a good scrub and your hair needs combing. You say: "Yes, I'd love to come, but please let me clean up first. I am not going to let myself down by appearing like this!" The English poet, George Herbert, writes about how God's loving invitation can shock and embarrass us:

Love bade me welcome,
Yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.

Purgatory, then, is recognising how deeply our sin has offended a generous God.

WAITING SEEMS LIKE ETERNITY

When you were at school, did you ever get 'detention' – being kept behind in the classroom while your pals went off to play games or went home for tea? If you did, every minute probably seemed like an hour. You really did not want to be there, but you had made a fool of yourself and you had to pay the price. Purgatory is a bit like a school child looking out the window at a fine sunny afternoon, knowing they should be laughing and having fun. The greatest pain of purgatory is not the pain of spiritual power but the pain of waiting, of realising you are missing the most wonderful thing there is – the vision of God and meeting once again all those people you loved so dearly during life. ■



Today's readings

GOD'S WORD TODAY

Prov 31:10-13. 19-20. 30-31
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6
Matthew 25: 14-30

One easy way of applying the parable of the Talents is to urge people to use your talents to the best of your ability. This is commonplace advice from school-teachers or sports coaches and appropriate in those settings. But the Bible is concerned about God and our relationship to the Lord: it is not a self-help manual designed to show us how to improve ourselves in a purely human fashion. The servants in the story represent different reactions to the coming of the master and the reckoning which will follow. Two apply themselves responsibly to the task in hand: the third claims that he has done nothing constructive out of fear, but the master accuses him rather of simple laziness and even wickedness. Matthew is telling us that the Son of Man will return and that we should live our lives with that in mind. The purpose of the master in the story is not just to find out the capabilities of the servants but also to decide who should share with him in his joy.

There are two extremes which we might try to avoid: one is becoming so fearful of encountering the Lord that we become paralysed and do nothing, like the lazy and wicked servant in the parable; the other is that we try to do so much that we end up exhausted but still feeling that we could - and should - have done more.



PURGATORY

The month of November is traditionally dedicated to remembering the souls in purgatory. For some people, it is a short 'winter Lent' during which they can do some of the practices that are common in the Pre-Easter Lent, such as attending daily Mass, cutting back on the amount of alcohol consumed or visiting the cemetery where loved ones are buried. Remembering our dead this month keeps us in touch with our roots.

