

A Sermon
Preached
in the Chapel
of
ALL SOULS COLLEGE
by
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on
Sunday, 14 June 2026

All Souls, the doctrine of purgatory, and remembrance of our past

Some aspects of the service in which we have just participated have taken us back to the foundation almost six hundred years ago. Archbishop Henry Chichele would surely have recognized those continuities, not least the prominence of beautiful music, thanks to the generosity of our neighbours from Merton. He might also have seen something familiar in what can claim to be the only survivor of Oxford's medieval colleges, with no undergraduates and a commitment to launching the careers of promising young scholars. What a time-travelling Chichele could only detect surviving in vestigial form today, on the other hand, is the second great purpose of his creation. His All Souls was both a college and a chantry, whose very name identified it with the doctrine of purgatory, and whose Fellows were expected to spend a lot of time in this chapel interceding for the souls of the dead. Only a century later the Protestant Reformation was sweeping purgatory away, in one of the most fundamental changes in Christian history, altering the whole relationship between the living and the dead in religion and in imagination.

Before exploring that theme and the wider question of memory, let me ask what's in a name. Until preparing

this sermon I had never thought seriously about the name All Souls, beyond seeing it as the English version of *Collegium omnium animarum fidelium defunctorum*, which admittedly sounds more resonant. That shows that I had not taken proper notice of Peregrine Horden's careful analysis of how the name emerged. Nor had I remembered that Ernest Jacob and Jeremy Catto both remarked how this was a standard formula which numerous founders of chantries tacked on to the end of their lists of names, these specified individuals being the primary beneficiaries of redemptive prayer in the chapel. This was to be, I quote, 'a certain perpetual college, with a warden and some scholars within Oxford and its university, to study and to pray for the King's and the Archbishop's well-being while they live, and after their deaths for their souls and the souls of the most famous king Henry V, Thomas late Duke of Clarence, the dukes, earls, barons, knights, armigerous men and other noblemen and commoners who have ended their lives in the King's and his father's reign in the French wars . . .'. They must have forgotten John Duke of Bedford, who died in 1435; someone later noticed because his name does appear in another list drawn up about thirty years later.

All Souls might therefore just stand for the '*et caetera*' conventionally added to the list. Colleges were normally named after founders or saints, if not after Jesus himself.

New College, Chichele's own alma mater and a partial model for his own foundation, was an oddity which had somehow evaded using its formal name St Mary's College of Winchester. After associating the young Henry VI with his college, Chichele could even have called it King's College Oxford, if he had no suitable saint in mind. It is however clear that Chichele himself did use the name All Souls, and it may well fit with the idea of including the whole group of those who had died for the Lancastrian cause in France. No doubt it is just as well that we no longer pray for that list of Lancastrian warriors, engaged as they were in a predatory war of conquest. It is hard not to think of Bob Dylan's wickedly ironic song '*With God on our side.*' Chichele himself is unlikely to have had such doubts, when he was a committed advocate of that policy, who clearly saw his 'unarmed soldiery' formed at All Souls as contributors to the cause of the Lancastrian dynasty. He was indeed the warlike Archbishop whose prolix speeches fill up much of the first act of Shakespeare's Henry V, to be heavily cut by any sensible director; the playwright took their messages from Holinshed's Chronicle, so they have no authentic source, but are true enough to Chichele's known opinions.

All Souls may also have been fortunate that its name made it relatively easy to fall back on prayers for the dead in general, a practice never at any stage forbidden by the

Anglican church, although contested by more radical Protestants. Anything that smacked of belief in purgatory was of course anathema after the Reformation. To reflect on this for a moment. The doctrine of purgatory had crept up within Western Christianity since the early Middle Ages, with a rather fuzzy theology following some way behind the practice. It was hardly a doctrine at all, with only a couple of general Conciliar statements about its existence backed up by a mishmash of ill-defined popular and elite beliefs. The idea that most of the faithful dead needed to purge their sins before they were fit to enter Heaven was coupled with the obligation for the living, as members of the greater communion, to ease their sufferings through prayer and ritual. Masses founded for this purpose multiplied on an exponential scale, to spawn a large body of unbeneficed clergy who scraped a living by saying them. Historians have been led to characterize late medieval Catholicism as 'a cult of the living in the service of the dead', and to identify purgatory as its defining doctrine. The evidence suggests that all this was popular and fully accepted by most believers, although it placed considerable demands on the living; only a minority of more austere clerics developed a critique of the mechanistic assumptions they detected in the system.

I would qualify that alleged dominance of purgatory for medieval Christians. Leaving aside the spiritual and

affective meanings of the faith, one should stress two equally important aspects. The first, well exemplified by this college, is that the Church reinforced the social system and the domination of the privileged minority, to the point of validating the secular ambitions of rulers. Secondly, when even the educated shared an animistic vision of the world as permeated by hidden influences and powers, intercession against misfortune and the protection of natural fertility were necessary expectations of religion, with multiple reflections in liturgy and ritual. In the age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation these elements would merge into the notion that a fiercely interventionist God would only favour or protect those nations and communities which came closest to following true religion and eliminating sin. Many clerics of all denominations over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were drawn into fantastic ambitions for various forms of theocratic tyranny, from which we were saved by their own internal quarrels, by the lack of manpower at parish level, and by the ways in which the most powerful laity, who were frequently the most sinful, undermined the whole programme of the zealots. This repressive ambition was an alarming variant on the theme of the world of the living being dominated by death and the judgement to come. Arguably it merely intensified the previous trend for purgatory to be envisaged as an outpost of hell, full of gruesome tortures.

The weakest link in the whole penitential system was the sale of indulgences, which often promised to remit thousands of years of *post mortem* suffering, with a penumbra of other devices making similar claims. Here was the starting point for Luther's revolt, leading into the wholesale rejection of the theology of good works, replaced by justification through faith. Purgatory was something of a sitting target for the reformers, as evidence for the long process that had allegedly seen the true original faith perverted by the frauds of greedy clerics, under the aegis of the papal Antichrist. The lack of serious scriptural evidence for penitential torment in the afterlife is I fear demonstrated by the New Testament lesson we just heard, the text cited by some Catholic theologians in a desperate attempt to fill the gap. This problem was combined with the rhetoric of 'purgatory pick-purse' to considerable polemical effect. The reformers expected the demolition of purgatory to undermine the theory of works, auricular confession, and the sacrificial doctrine of the Mass. Assignment to Heaven or Hell was now envisaged as following immediately on death, whether or not in a fully predestinarian scheme, so that the living and the dead could no longer perform any services for one another.

Here was indeed a great shift, one which we know was implemented through the extensive destruction of objects that symbolised the old creed, alongside many rituals

and customs. Widespread disaffection and foot-dragging can be identified across England, not least in a conservative institution like All Souls, whose educational role had saved it from the general abolition of chantries under Edward VI. Only from the 1570s did the 43-year Wardenship of Robert Hovenden coincide with the firm establishment of the new faith among the Fellows. At village level the linked feasts of All Saints and All Souls, previously conceived as a kind of window through which contact could be made with the dead, caused trouble for decades through the persistence of overnight bellringing for the departed. All the same, a belief that depended on inherited social convention, institutional structures, and the customary allocation of communal resources had no long-term capacity to withstand official disapproval.

Reformers understood that the old church had been responding to natural human needs, even as they argued it had done so in a perverse fashion. One response to these recognised impulses was through funeral sermons, which combined the praise of God with comfort for the survivors and a display of charity towards the dead. The emphasis in the burial service was on the 'sure and certain hope of the resurrection', giving rise to some Puritan unease about its application to notorious sinners. Even the leading Puritan divine William Perkins, however, was prepared to argue 'We pray in generall manner for the faithfull departed, that God would hasten

their joyfull resurrection, and the full accomplishment of their hapiness.’ In practice the Anglican church would manage, perhaps illogically, to combine an insistence on the general depravity of humankind with a much more positive attitude towards the individual dead. The liberal part of that position is I suppose pretty much where we still are. What we have not done is to follow the advice of a remarkable sermon produced by a Laudian Fellow named William Page in 1635, which he prudently left in manuscript after his printed advocacy of bowing at the name of Jesus had already offended many of the godly. Page not merely asserted that prayer for the dead was scriptural; he went on to recommend that the Fellows should return to the Founder’s instruction and pray for the souls of Henry V and the faithful departed.

That daring sermon belonged to an age of intense intellectual activity and of acrimonious debate both between and within different confessions. In retrospect historians naturally like to pick out those marginal figures who were undermining the whole traditional neo-scholastic world view, the pioneers of the new natural philosophy we now call science. Some Fellows of All Souls, Christopher Wren notable amongst them, were active on that front. The great majority of Oxford dons, however, were absorbed in what they saw as the crucial task of their times. This was to establish the absolute truths about God’s purposes, through the application of

logic and rigorous source criticism to both scripture and the Patristic tradition. Their expectation was naturally that the English church would emerge validated as the true one. Both the scale and the sophistication of that enterprise have been brilliantly reconstructed in recent times, notably by Jean-Louis Quantin and Dmitri Levitin. We may well think it appropriate that the scholarship of our own colleagues can revive the memory of predecessors whose failure to achieve their ends may have been inevitable, but certainly did not proceed from stupidity. They hardly deserved the casual dismissal as exponents of mere pedantry widely applied to them by eighteenth-century intellectuals.

Like the debate over purgatory, those efforts made some unintended contributions to what another sometime Fellow, Charles Taylor, has memorably analysed as the anthropocentric turn, the fashion in which religion has swung towards betterment and satisfaction on earth. Good works have definitely reasserted themselves today, with far less emphasis on any link to schemes of salvation. Meanwhile truth claims have been radically revised, largely thanks to those innovative natural philosophers whose memory I just invoked so briefly. We are now used to the idea they pioneered, that our knowledge of the world we inhabit is essentially provisional, subject to endless revision, and in addition we have learned that unpredictability is a necessary

feature of things. Claims for certainty about an afterlife for which we possess no testable evidence at all can hardly have much purchase in such an intellectual context, but we might think that space does remain for both faith and honest uncertainty.

We do know some big things with virtual certainty; not just our planet but the universe itself are both time-limited, if on a scale that defies our comprehension. Memory cannot therefore be eternal, unless there is another timeless world to house it. Blaise Pascal, poised as he was between his own frighteningly austere religion and a new scientific understanding, declared 'The eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me.' Into that void must ultimately go the works of Shakespeare and Tolstoy, of Bach and Mozart, a thought which distresses me much more than the likely termination of personal existence. What I do believe these centuries-old rituals in this chapel achieve is to stimulate memory on a manageable and human scale, fitting to our limited understanding. Chichele's generation, just before the advent of printing, seem to have envisaged memory rather differently; for them it was tied up with ensuring the provision of intercessory prayer. As things turned out, by situating his chantry in a college the archbishop had ensured that his foundation would survive to honour his memory centuries after those prayers had changed their nature. Admittedly that rather curiously phrased

prayer for our benefactors does induce the cheeky thought that you can still pay for our Warden to pray for you after your death, if you are rich enough.

One notable recent addition to memory is the placing of the cleaned and restored portrait statues of the founders in the antechapel. When I first saw those wonderful works by John Massingham in the 1960s they had been removed from their original position over the front gateway, to stand blackened and ignored in a corner of the colonnade. Even after restoration they were hidden away in the undercroft for decades, before finding their rightful place. This chapel itself, with its incongruous mixture of the gothic and the baroque, and the Victorian restoration of the reredos, tells a very complex story about the past of the college. To me one of its strongest messages does indeed arise from its current state, which locates it in that time of Victorian confidence from the 1860s onwards when some radical junior Fellows, soon followed by Warden Anson and the wider Fellowship, initiated reforms that gave election based on merit new force. Largely as a result, this college became a famous place, a byword for intellectual excellence, as I don't believe it had ever truly been before. Although not all those nineteenth-century attitudes and values might please us today, they spurred on a transformation that we should still remember with enormous gratitude. The ancient memory of those prayers for the sufferers in

purgatory is also still around us here, however, for example in the form of the misericords under the seats in the original oaken stalls. Those in search of a penitential experience might like to try perching on a misericord for a few minutes; while doing so they could also remember the dead even if they don't pray to speed their release from purgatorial fire.