

The Son Makes Alive Whom He Wills

a sermon preached on the Feast of

All Souls

2 November 2007

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest

Lections: 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 5:19-25

There are four people who are particularly on my mind tonight. My grandparents, Jack and Rona Gratwick. A close school friend, Barry. A fellow ordinand, Ian.

My grandfather died when I was 12. He survived the ordeal of the trenches of the first world war, but was overcome by post-operative infection after kidney stones were removed at age 73. Jack was a larger-than-life figure to me, who I loved immensely, who always seemed to have time for me, and who struck me as a generous man – though I was shocked by an attitude towards Jews which, once I had the power of language, felt profoundly anti-Semitic. Perhaps it was the toxic potency of such prejudicial infection in the soul which killed him? I have no idea what Jack's faith was. I don't recall him ever speaking about it. I don't recall there ever being any church-going. There was no funeral for my grandfather. I used to think that I had been excluded, as a child, but subsequently my mother revealed that Jack had directed that there should be no funeral (not a practice I could ever recommend!) because he had donated his body to scientific purposes.

My grandmother died from inoperable throat cancer. We'll never know for sure whether it was the many early years of smoking, or the later years of astonishing alcohol consumption of this woman who we all called, quite accurately, 'Little Granny'. Or perhaps there was simply something in her soul which she refused to swallow? She survived my grandfather by 13 years. In contrast to Jack, who I only knew as a child, I spent a lot of very happy times with Little Granny in my early adult years. She fed me and my brothers enormous lunches and dinners. She was a part of my courting years – I can still hear her saying of Beth and me, "Aint love grand!" Though she held her first, and the only great grandchild she would hold, as though Cathy were a time-bomb, even so the memory of that is such a joy. When she was dying I was still a fervent young-adult convert. I wanted to talk with her about 'faith in Jesus'. But Little Granny had been terrorised by her fiercely and aggressively Roman Catholic mother, and like Jack, there was never any church-going, and no talk about faith. I was bitterly disappointed that she seemed to me to die without faith.

During our high school years Barry and I often stayed over at each other's homes, usually working on the electric train set which we shared. As the train setups became more sophisticated his home became the base – I had most of the rolling stock and track, he had the space, and his father built us a huge special-purpose table on which we constructed quite an elaborate set-up. In the latter high school years the train set had a weaker attraction than girls (and perhaps the pressures of studies?), and we seemed to move in different directions. About ten years after leaving school I learned through a mutual friend that Barry had died – the first school friend death is always a shock. More shocking was the fact that Barry was one of the early AIDS deaths. I don't ever recall faith-talk or church-going in Barry's family, and I wonder about his last years and months.

Friendship with Ian was short, fast, and intense. We became ordinands at the same time. The seminary process, even in its dispersed mode as was the case, fosters an intensity and depth in relationships. Ian and I spent many hours energetically turning over theology, liturgy, ecclesiology, scripture, church

history and our own experiences, over many long blacks – Ian and theology are partly responsible for my taking up coffee drinking! At weekly eucharists at the Wollaston College chapel Ian played the piano with exquisite sensitivity and life, in a way that is quite rare and unforgettable – musically-brilliant, yet utterly sympathetic with and subservient to the liturgical symbols and action. Ian, too, died an AIDS death. When he shaved his head I thought he was being trendy. He was courageous enough to tell us the truth, and remained an ordinand for as long as his health allowed. His loss, from our group, from the church, feels immense to me – here was a person of deep integrity, thoughtful, intelligent, insightful, honest, courageous, sensitive to the symbols of christian faith in a way so rarely witnessed. He was the most priestly one among us. His church, the church he loved and served, continues to officially condemn him as a gay man. His funeral was hard, yet also inexplicably joyful.

This Feast of All Souls witnesses to the liberating good news that while I may be troubled or anxious about the faith of those I have loved and lost, “just as the Father raises the dead and makes them alive, so also the Son makes alive whom he wills.”¹ The sacramental reality of Christ’s Body and Blood – which is the heart and soul of the christian faith - is the astonishing and unexpected life which is showered upon those whom Christ invites to the banquet of the Kingdom. It is our dangerous and deluded presumption that we think we know who Christ has invited to his wedding feast that is the problem, not the symbol of the heavenly banquet itself. “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out.”²

All we need to know is that Christ has been calling from before time, continues to call, and will call until the last time³ to his banquet of life - that the Son makes alive whom he wills. The only question, then, is will we who are in our various graves, living or dead, come out at his call and receive the abundant life he offers?

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

¹ John 5:21
² John 5:28
³ 1 Peter 1:5