

Many cultures have ways of regularly remembering the dead.

It seems to speak to a very deep human need.

The Feast of All Souls is our Christian tradition for this remembering. It acknowledges that those who have died, whether in the last year or over a decade ago, are both separated from us and still connected to us.

It acknowledges that although we no longer see them, those who have died are in the presence of the same loving God who we are in relationship with through Jesus Christ.

Someone's funeral is not the end of our relationship with them. The relationship continues, albeit in a different way. The funeral is a step in the journey as we honour their life and acknowledge their death.

Our complex emotions and grieving do not end with a memorial service, and that's ok.

Tonight's service is an opportunity to take the time to remember those who have died, and pray with others who have also lost loved ones.

While death and suffering can dominate our headlines, personal conversations about death and the processes and rituals around dying are generally considered uncomfortable.

I recently had dinner with a group of friends with the aim of planning our funerals, or at least writing lists for our families of the Bible readings and hymns we might like them to consider.

When each of us had mentioned to others our plans for that evening, the general reaction was that they thought us a tad morbid. I assure you, it was a night of good humour and genuine support as friends.

Death is not an easy topic. Not talking about doesn't make it any easier, so we may as well talk about it, while those we love are still alive.

Increasingly, people are coming to us at St. John's and talking about their funeral or memorial services when they know their life is coming to an end. As they are dying, they involve their family in the conversations and everyone involved feels better prepared for what we know will still be a difficult time.

When death comes unexpectedly, this kind of conversation is not possible, but we still do our best to honour the person who has died, as well as allowing space for those who mourn.

Even after a formal event such as a funeral or memorial has happened, we can still find places to express our reactions to loss in the weeks, months and years that follow, whether that's at anniversaries, birthdays, family gatherings or here in church.

My uncle Barry died last year while he was travelling overseas. There was a time of unknowing before we learned that he was in hospital, unlikely to regain consciousness. My uncle had survived a number of health scares in his life, but it was still a shock to his family and friends when he actually died.

He was a man who valued traditional rituals and formality in these matters. My uncle was not a very religious man himself, but Barry's partner's funeral had been in a church when Robert died many years before, so we honoured my uncle in the same way with a Christian funeral in a church.

Remembering him in particular today is not a denial of the reality of his death. It is an acknowledgement that his death is now a part of my life, it is another experience that adds to the person I am today and how I interact with others.

All our experiences make us who we are.

Death is a part of our existence, but it is not the end.

Jesus' death did not separate him from his disciples or us who would come after. Through the power of Christ's resurrection at Easter, our death will not separate us from the love of those we love and remember.

We will each journey after loss in our own time, in our own way, and we can have confidence that God is with us as we travel. As we cry or laugh, sing or scream, or sit in silence when we cannot find words, God hears us. God knows our experiences and holds us and those we love in God's own eternal love.

Our God is not remote or disconnected from our human lives. Through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we can know that God loves and cares not only for us as we live our life on earth, but also when this life comes to an end.

Through faith, I know that death is not to be feared, it will not be the final end and it will not be the end of my relationship with God.

This does not mean I find the deaths of those I care about easy.

It is still sad to lose a family member or a friend. It still causes hurt and pain.

But I am deeply comforted by knowing that God knows what my suffering means, and will give me comfort during my time of sorrow.

Through the birth, life and death of Jesus Christ, I have confidence that God knows what I'm going through whatever that may be. Jesus knew joy and happiness, sadness and despair, just like we do.

Through the resurrection, I know that Jesus overcame the power of death, so that it is nothing to be feared and is not the final end.

Jesus made a way to God for all of us and those we love.

I am deeply comforted by knowing that those who have died are at rest with the God that is eternal love, and at my own life's end I will join them in that joyful presence.

Your own remembering doesn't have to wait until All Souls each year, but this feast allows us to come together as a community in a tangible sign that we are not alone.

Just as we are gathered here in God's presence, those who have died are gathered in eternal rest with each other and they are not alone either.

Our God knows life. Our God knows death.  
Our God holds us through it all.

The reality of death reminds us to enjoy and value the gift of life.

Tonight as we remember those who have died, we are joined by the whole company of heaven.

We thank God that we knew them, loved and were loved by them, and will one day be with them again.

The Lord be with you.

Elizabeth Murray