

Reflection on the Gospel-All the Faithful Departed

(Matthew 11:25-30)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The “Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed” or “Feast of All Souls” as it used to be called (November 2) has traditionally been a fairly sombre feast in the liturgical calendar. It is a time to remember those who have died, especially the deceased members of our family and those close to us. It follows immediately on the Feast of All Saints (November 1). There is a close overlap between these two feasts that fall on successive days. Over these days, we celebrate the mystery of the communion of saints: the saints *through whom* we pray to God, the saints *for whom* we pray, and the “saints” or God’s “holy” people *with whom* we gather to pray.

All Souls Day was first celebrated by monks in the seventh century, on the day after Pentecost. Since the 10th century, it has been observed on November 2. Prayer for the dead is grounded in a deep conviction that a purifying process accompanies the experience of death. Theories about the nature of such a process abound. Some suggest that at death we face the personal limitations we have not faced in life. Who knows? It remains in the realm of mystery.

Matthew 11:25-30 may seem a strange choice of gospel text for today’s celebration. It focuses on the living rather than the dead. Jesus calls to himself those who are weary or carrying heavy burdens. These terms can be understood both literally and metaphorically. The ambiguity is possibly intended. Jesus promises “rest” to the burdened. In the biblical tradition, rest is God’s rest or “Shabbat”. In ancient Israel, Shabbat was for the whole Earth community, including the land itself. In the context of today’s feast, God’s “rest” becomes never-ending rest in God’s presence, freedom from enslavement or suffering of any kind. This unfailing “rest” beyond the grave is promised to those who learn from Jesus, in other words those who truly live as disciples. In the final analysis, All Souls Day is as much for the living as for those who have gone before us.

The gospel also reminds us that God is the God of all that exists, the God of “heaven and earth”. Sometimes, the human community places heavy burdens on other-than-humankind, including the precious topsoil and the creatures that inhabit Earth’s oceans. As we remember our loved ones who have gone to God, we might also commit ourselves to preserving the home of life, our Earth, and thus, in the spirit of discipleship, provide God’s rest or Shabbat for all that is.