

Homily delivered on ALL SOULS DAY 2022
at Penzance by Fr Paul Andrew

Most people admire the wonderful Persian carpets that can sell for a fortune – but did you know that each carpet has to have a small flaw in it? It cannot be perfect because only God is perfect. In a complementary way Native American tribes are known for their elaborate and colourful quilts. Often the memories of the tribes are woven into large quilts used in religious ceremonies. Native American peoples are believed to be among the best quilt makers in the world. What many people do not know is that they have an unwritten law governing the art of quilting: every quilt must have some flaw. Even when they could easily produce the perfect quilt, they go out of their way to introduce a flaw into it. Since the quilt for them is basically a representation of human life and the human condition, the symbolism is clear: no human life is perfect. In a way, the feast of All Souls which we celebrate today echoes the same message: (apart from Our Lady) no human life is perfect, not even the best Christian life. The Good News we celebrate today is that God loves us even when we are not perfect, and that the love of God does not abandon the souls of our departed brothers and sisters in the faith even when they did not measure up to the ideals of Christian perfection as outlined in the Beatitudes that we heard as our gospel reading on the Solemnity of All Saints, yesterday.

In that feast of All Saints, we, the saints who are still struggling on earth (*the church militant*), celebrate fellowship with the saints who have already arrived in heavenly glory (*the church triumphant*). Today we celebrate our fellowship with the saints in purgatory, a state of temporary suffering for departed souls who are not yet fully ready for full fellowship with God in the glory of heaven (*the church expectant*).

All Christians believe in the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. Purgatory is not mentioned as one of the “last things” because, strictly speaking, purgatory is a part of heaven. Purgatory is a sort of remedial class for heaven-bound souls. Souls who go to purgatory are those who have been judged worthy of heaven, but not straightaway. They still need some purification (purgation) before they are ready for heaven because, according to Revelation 21:27, “*nothing unclean shall enter it.*”

Some Christians have a problem with our Church’s teaching on purgatory because purgatory is not mentioned by name in the Bible. Yet the same Christians believe in the Trinity even though the “Trinity” is not mentioned

by name in the Bible. We arrive at the doctrine on purgatory in the same way we arrive at the doctrine on the Trinity, by making a logical inference from what God *has* explicitly revealed.

Catholic lay apologist James Akin calls purgatory the "boot camp of heaven." That's a good analogy. No matter what your physical condition prior to entering the military, boot camp is there to bring everyone to the same level of physical and mental fitness for service. The same can be said for heaven. To enter into the beatific vision, the immediate and intimate knowledge of God which the angelic spirits and the souls of the just enjoy in Heaven, one must be prepared, be made fit and ready for it.

Even though officially Catholics believe in purgatory and Protestants do not, unofficially almost everyone seems to believe in an interim state of purification before heaven. When we lose loved ones, Catholics and Protestants alike pray for the dead. We all say, "May their souls rest in peace." Why? If the souls of our departed are in hell, why pray for them? Our prayers cannot help souls in hell. And if they are in heaven, why pray for them? Our prayers cannot help those in heaven either, they are already in heaven. This is not a new idea, look at what Judas Maccabeus did in the Old Testament (*2 Maccabees ch.12*): ⁴⁴ *For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead.* ⁴⁵ *But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.* Any sort of prayer for the dead only has meaning insofar as the souls of the dead are in an interim state where they have not yet reached perfect union and peace with God, and where our prayers can help them get there. That is purgatory.

In the feast of All Souls we pray for the souls of the faithful departed who are being purified in purgatory. In this we profess our belief that, just as God has not stopped loving these poor souls because of their imperfections, neither have we. For us the belief in purgatory is Good News: even though we may not in this life be perfect as our heaven father is perfect (*Matthew 5:48*) we can still hold fast to the hope that there is a room with our name on waiting for us in the kingdom of heaven (*John 14:2*).