

Sermon – Celebrating the churchyard Psalm 103, 13 Sept 2020

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We have seen lots of pictures of the churchyard this morning as we celebrate it. Pictures of some of the many different kinds of life that occurs in the churchyard – animal-life, bird-life and insect life as well as all the plants and trees. From the office in the hall I can see squirrels jumping from tree to tree. And when I walk through the graveyard, which in pre-Covid times I did quite frequently, I am always bumping (not literally) into lots of human life too – people walking their dog, our wonderful team of folk who help maintain the graveyard, people who come to enjoy the peace and quiet, and people who come to visit the grave of a friend or family member. Over the centuries there have been countless funerals at the graveside in our church yard.

The gravestones are a reminder the churchyard is the last resting place many, many people. Nick spoke to us a few weeks ago that a cemetery is where people sleep, a dormitory for the dead, where the dead rest, awaiting Jesus' second coming. And while the dead rest in peace, the graveyard is a place where the dead are remembered.

Mary has been doing work on recording the gravestones and she is hoping to do more which includes taking rubbings of the stones. The oldest gravestones are several hundred years old. However, not everyone would have had a gravestone – the local squire and other important people might have had a memorial in church [of which there are a number or a gravestone] but for most people the grave would not necessarily have been marked. In a village church yard, which of course this was until halfway through the twentieth century, people were remembered because they were part of a community. They were rooted in this place as part of a community that had continued for generations so for them gravestones were less important.

It was during the industrial revolution that more memorials were placed on graves- people didn't want to be forgotten or their relatives didn't want them to be forgotten. The memorial showed that they belonged to that place and that they were important. If you go into some of the Victorian cemeteries, and Highgate Cemetery in London is a good example, there are huge memorials.

Having burial grounds in cities, which of course Chesterton has now become part of, are important - if cities do not have places to bury the dead, then the city becomes a place without a memory, a place in denial of death and humanity according to Ken Worpole in his book about cemeteries and churchyards.

Remembering is important and is one of the reasons that we care for the churchyard. But even when a grave is marked by a stone, over time the names are worn away by the wind and rain

People may forget the individuals who have been buried or their ashes interred in the churchyard, as time passes and people move away from the area, but God doesn't forget. The words of Psalm 103 that we have said [sung by the choir] are ones that are used in the funeral service. In that psalm the psalmist reminds us that even though human life is transient – it is like a flower that grows and then dies and is blown away by the wind- God's love is from everlasting to everlasting. The cycle of the changing seasons and the abundance of life in the churchyard is a reminder that life continues in the same way God's love continues, God's love is never ending. The continuing life in the church yard is also a reminder for us that death is not the end; that there is life beyond death, which one day we will experience along with those who have already died and are laid to rest in the churchyard.

Yes, the church yard is a place of death, but it is very also much a place of love, of God's love and of life.