

All Souls' Day
Trinity, Iowa City
2 November 2008

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The liturgy is not a museum piece, but it *is* a family heirloom.

I heard that from a liturgics professor at one of our seminaries, and it stuck.

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I think about that this evening as we reach back to music and liturgy that are centuries old in order to worship God and thank him for all the faithful departed. We celebrate this family occasion – a kind of family reunion, really, though most of the family isn't able to be present in any way that we can really recognize – we celebrate it by bringing out the old family heirlooms, not for show, but to put them to the use for which they were always intended: to glorify God and to give us a foretaste of his glory.

I think too about the people we are remembering – the family members, the friends, the stranger once encountered who became an instrument of grace and was never to be forgotten thereafter. What are we to say about them?

I once heard a priest complain about the expression "I'm sorry for your loss." "Loss?" He said this with indignation. "Loss? The very idea that those who have died are lost makes me so mad I could spit." It's probably not a good idea to get this worked up over a merely conventional expression, but theologically of course he's completely right:

I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing.

My particular hobbyhorse, though, is a different one. I get it from my students a good deal when I teach about immortality and the resurrection of the body. "They live on in our memories." Oh, how I hate that! If you want to call that "living on" – as though that wispy, fitful, tenuous, and entirely passive existence could count as "living," except as a metaphor.

And the life of the world to come is no metaphor, no shadow, no image. It is the real thing, of which *this* life is a kind of metaphor, a sort of wispy, fitful, and tenuous shadow cast by the fullness of life that we will enjoy when we dwell with God in light inaccessible.

This is not in any way to denigrate the life we now live, for this life is precious; but we lose this precious life only to gain one that is far more precious, so surpassingly wonderful that it hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive. Think, if this helps you, of the words and the music of our worship this evening: not the words and music as spoken and sung, but just the letters on the page, the notes on the score. They are just black marks on paper – until they are made alive by voices and pipes and the enkindled affections of human hearts. Just black marks: and yet even in that state, would we not grieve to lose them? And would not a liturgist rejoice to discover the words of an old rite? Would not a musician delight to unearth a new score?

Precious and joyful and full of delight are these marks on a page, but how much more precious are they when they are given breath and life and a holy dwelling-place by voices and pipes and the enkindled affections of human hearts. And in the same way, precious and joyful and full of delight are the lives that we now live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us. But these lives are as an unread manuscript and an unsung score to that far more precious life in which we will walk no longer by faith, but by sight.

No, those whom we remember this evening, those for whom we thank God, are not lost, for it is the Father's will that nothing and no one will be lost from those he has given to the Son. And they do not merely live on in some shadowy metaphorical nowhere-land, for what was sown a corruptible body will be raised an incorruptible body, and the mortal shall put on immortality, and we with all the faithful departed shall see the Son in his glory, his nail-scarred hands stretched out to welcome us, the ones whom the Father has given him; and he shall in no wise cast us out.

And so to the Father who gives us, the Son who receives us, and the Holy Ghost who quickens us unto everlasting life be ascribed by all the faithful, living, departed, and yet to come, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*