

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *I was surprised at how many names were written down to be read out at the All Souls' Day Mass and how few people attended to hear the names they had written. Why do we pray for the dead? Is it not too late? Surely, if we are to be saved or be good enough to get to heaven, it has to be done before we die?*

Answer: I too was surprised at the high number of names on the list and the relatively small attendance. It felt as though some people thought that this was somebody else's work, to pray for the dead, even though it was their relatives who were on the prayer list!

A significant element of the Reformation concerned abuses of prayers for the dead. The church seemed to be encouraging people to offer gifts or money in exchange for promises that such prayers would hasten the arrival of their loved-ones in heaven. The potential for corruption is obvious.

The Roman Catholic Church still teaches that prayers for the dead provide indulgences for those who make them, that is time off Purgatory, the place where people go, unless Saints, to work off their sins before finally seeing God in heaven.

The Church of England joined with the Reformers to deny this practice and the doctrine of Purgatory which lies behind it.

So, if this is the case, what is the point of praying for the dead?

Well, the answer in its simplest form is that there is as much reason for praying for the dead as there is in thinking about them or continuing to love them. The reality is that we can't stop ourselves thinking of them and remaining true in our love for them, so why not pray for them as well?

Your question asks "is it not too late?" Well, in one sense, yes. Too late for those who have died to amend their lives. However, it is not too late for God.

Forgive me if I say that behind the question is a little bad theology!

We are never good enough to go to Heaven. We don't approach death relying on our goodness or our record of brilliant successes or our kind actions. We approach death only with our faith in Christ crucified. It is this faith which is our only plea for that place in heaven. But

remember that we don't dispense places in heaven to ourselves or our friends. That is God's role, and playing God is definitely out for Christians.

Our human activities are fatally flawed by selfishness and self-deceit. Even when we think we are doing really well, we are in fact falling short of God's glory. Only with this faith in the

reconciling love of God on the cross does our approach to God give us confidence. Even so, that doesn't exonerate us from trying hard to be the best we can. When we do fall short, we need forgiveness and time to improve.

One of the great prayers of Absolution used by the Church expresses this concept.

"The almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon and forgiveness of all your sins, time for amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit."

To that may be added the grace and comfort of those who are in communion with us, both the living and the departed, and being in prayerful touch with them can bring us the additional support we need.

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