The New Shofar
All Saints and All Souls And *not* Halloween

Halloween as it is presented to us today has nothing to do with our Christian faith. It's origins date back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain which was their new year and was celebrated in November 1. The Celts believed that on the night before the new year, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred. On the night of October 31, they celebrated Samhain, when it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth.

The Souls of the Righteous are in the Hand of God (Wisdom 3:1-9)

All of us have been touched by the sobering reality of death, and so it is good for us today to pause for a few minutes, lift our loved ones up in prayer, and think about our Christian hope. In our Anglican funeral service, when we stand at a graveside, we pray: *In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our sister or brother.* The key phrase here is: *In sure and certain hope.*

When the Bible uses the word 'hope', it means the future that God has promised, for the world and for us as individuals. We look around us now and see a world in which bad things happen to good people, in which people are oppressed and exploited and in which they die of deadly diseases. But the Bible promises us that things are not always going to be this way.

This is especially relevant for us in this service today. In many cases, our loved ones suffered a lot before they died, and as we get older and we approach our own death, many of us are going to suffer too. Is that the end of the story? Does human life inevitably end in pain and suffering, with no relief except extinction? Or is there a better hope, a better future, something that God has promised and that we can look forward to? Today's reading from Wisdom deals with the questions that we all ask: where are our loved ones now? Is there some sort of future for them? Will we see them again?

Where are our loved ones now?

They were alive with us, and now – in some cases, quite suddenly – they're gone. It's natural for us to ask, "When the body dies, what happens to the true *self*, to the true human being? The Bible does not answer the question of *how* it works, because the Bible is not a textbook of science. But the reading from Wisdom leaves us in no doubt that death is not the end for us…*But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace'. (***Wisdom 3:1-3***).*

The text does not answer questions of detail: "Where are they? How is it possible for them to have survived death?" This text simply gives us three powerful and connected truths: **one**, the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God; **two**, they are safe, and **three**, they are at peace.

Think of that for a moment. The text says: '*They are safe'*. Maybe, in some cases, the years before they died were not easy ones for them. Maybe they had to deal with the increasing frailty of their bodies as they got older. Or maybe they died early, after an unexpected disease or an accident or tragedy of some kind. But now, says Wisdom, '*no torment will ever touch them'*, **because** '*they are in the hand of God*'. Our loved ones are in no danger in the hands of God! As the **Book of Revelation**, puts it, '(*God) will wipe away every tear from their eyes…mourning and crying and pain will be no more'* (**21:4).**

Wisdom says that our loved ones are '*in the hand of God'*, and that is surely the safest place in the entire universe. It goes on to say that they are '*at peace'*; there is no more worry, no more anxiety, no more struggle and pain and suffering. This is the way the New Testament talks about death. Christians who have died are said to have '*fallen asleep'*. So where are our loved ones now? Wisdom tells us that they are *safe in the hand of God, and they are at peace*.

At the moment, when we look around, we see war and injustice, poverty and disease and natural disaster and so on. But this was not God's original plan when he created the world, and it is not going to be the last word. No – Jesus came to tell us that 'the kingdom of God is at hand' – in other words, that God is going to extend his loving rule over the whole earth and make it whole again. And when that day comes, God will raise the souls of the righteous from the dead, just as he raised Jesus from the dead, and we will finally enjoy this world as God intended when he created it at the beginning.

Our Hope is certain because it is grounded in the Risen Christ

This is hard for us to understand because it isn't a very common idea about life after death these days. But listen to these words of Jesus himself: *This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day… No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day" (**John 6:40, 44**).* And remember also his words to Martha at the grave of her brother Lazarus: I *am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live…" (***John 12:25***).*

So there is indeed a future for our loved ones, and for us too! In the words of Wisdom: "*In the time of their visitation they will shine forth and will run like sparks through the stubble*" (**3:7**). It is this sure and certain hope that gives me strength when I think about my own death. Halloween is about fear, about warding off ghosts and ghouls but is powerless to do anything more than entertain. It is the antithesis of our All Souls and All Saints festivities. They are celebrations of Hope. Hope because we believe what God has promised that *the souls of the just are in the hands of God.* We celebrate God's gift to us, that in Christ, *those who believe in me, even though we die, we will live.*