18 August 2019: Said Eucharist with Hymns
The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity
‘The Church and Its Ancestors’

I’m sitting in a seminar room at the University of Southern Africa in Pretoria surrounded by mainly black theologians and students. It’s an open session on urban theology. No papers. We’re talking about Christianity in South Africa, struggling to find a different voice. A voice that isn’t colonial and can speak prophetic hope. Too much of the black/white divide that still exists in that country is related to a colonizing of the mind and the emotions by something that came from the West and didn’t integrate itself with the God who was already there before the missionaries came. Because there were already strong theological beliefs among the peoples of Southern Africa, but they were castigated as idolatrous, pagan and demonic. As someone coming from the west as a Christian theologian I’m not in that room to speak so much as to listen, and they want to tell me difficult things that I can’t quite grasp. One man looks me directly and says “I have never met a white man who has ever treated me as fully human. There’s always a holding back, a glance, a twitch, a tone of voice that makes me feel I’m not yet worthy. I am not yet where he is – a civilized human being.” One woman, who heads up an important non-governmental agency in Cape Town, tells me: “The cities don’t belong to us. The cities are for white people. We enter them as domestic workers and we return to the townships when the day’s over.” And the townships don’t exist. They don’t appear on any official road maps or road signs, even today. I’m confused. These are educated people. Some of them have important positions in the university and as NGOs. I ask the Dean of the Faculty of Theology whether he lives in Pretoria. He smiles. “I have a house my wife and I bought here years ago. We live in that house. But I don’t belong there.” I ask him to explain and he finds it difficult, his answer being drawn from him, being drawn into a reflection he hasn’t really articulated before. “I was born in a village. My father was the head of the village. When he died my elder brother became head of the village. I was
educated and sent away. But my umbilical cord is buried in that village. I will be buried in that village. That’s where I belong.”

The sense of belonging in Africa, and kinship that stretches into so many dimensions, is profound. It’s not about ownership, property, individual rights, blood-lines or inheritance. It’s about a relationship with both the land and the ancestors. And as I listened something came to me that came to me again when I was reading that well-known passage for the Letter to the Hebrews that was our lesson this morning: “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

What came to me in that seminar room and reading that passage has something to do with the ancestors and, more importantly, how these ancestors remind us continually that we do not just belong to ourselves. We are part of larger communities that are a great deal more important to us than we often think, and reach across the whole of the species *humanum*. We have lost something of that sense of belonging and, in the west, we have not really understood what ancestor worship elsewhere in the world actually means. The Church can never rid itself, and should never rid itself, of a certain piety towards those who have gone before us. People who are no longer with us in any visible sense nevertheless live as part of us daily, hourly.

I sometimes look at the displays of family photos in a house I’m visiting. Weddings long passed. Grandparents, uncles, aunts all now dead. The new born who are now driving cars. The toddler on the beach now getting engaged or going to university or killed in some tragic circumstances. Often these photos are grouped together in a corner, on a sideboard or piano. And they are, in their own way, family shrines where generations past and present are huddled together as time passes. These people live in us. They live in our dreams, our memories, in our medical histories and genetic makeup. The communion of the saints acts in a similar way in church life. On Tuesday of this past week we commemorated Jeremy Taylor, Bishop of Down and Connor, Teacher of the Faith, 1667 and on Thursday the Virgin Mary. We are surrounded here with plaques and memorials to the “cloud of witnesses”, most of whom we have never heard of. But they are there, materially shaping the environment in which we worship and are formed spiritually. I’m going to say something now which might sound shocking, but it’s something I believe we deeply know and, in Christ, know even more profoundly: the dead are not dead in the way we often think they are.
This isn’t a state of affairs where we call in the ‘ghost-busters’ or hold séances. The dead are not dead in that way either. This is a state of affairs that calls for a certain piety – a deep, considered, spiritual respect. They have not forgotten us; and we should not forget them – because in and as the Church we exist in Christ together. The Eucharist is an enacted site, an orchestration, for that coming together in and through Christ died and Christ risen. We come to the altar bearing all those who have come before us – genetically, historically and spiritually. We don’t come as individuals in our solitary privacies to receive a solitary and private donation of Christ, from Christ. We come as the Church - the body of Christ to the body of Christ. Some of those we bring “did not receive what was promised” as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it. But this is part of God’s divine providence “that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” All of us, together, who make up the kingdom. So we come with “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel and the prophets”; we come with aunt Ada and uncle Les, mum, dad, brother Peter, husbands, wives, past loves, new friends; as a theologian I come with Gregory of Nazianzen, Augustine, Julian of Norwich and Karl Barth. I have been spoken to by all these people; they speak through me. All of us speak in Christ who is the Word in all the articulations of our faith and love and mercy and forgiveness. And together, together, we persevere and run the race that is set before us until all things are laid at the feet of Christ, and the glory of God is fully revealed.

I am one with my black brothers and sisters in Pretoria – and they have taught me painful and profound things about exclusion and about a piety for ancestors, for those no longer with us, those who are not dead as sometimes we think of the dead, those to whom I belong as Christ gathers the whole of humanity into Himself.