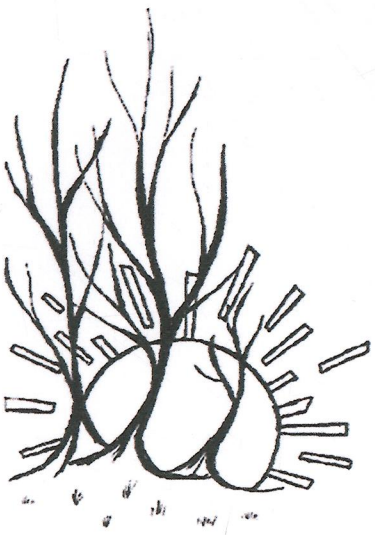
A Matter of Death and Life

In 1956, with a Carnegie medal winning children's story *The last battle*, C.S. Lewis brought his Chronicles of Narnia to a close. In that work he wrote: "And as he spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures (in Narnia) had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no-one on earth has read: which goes on for ever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."

The untimed and unknown end of life is a fearsome but reliable aspect of the human experience. However, the inevitable experience of death, both by the dying and by those they leave behind, is very much determined by their perception of this great mystery. Is death the final act or curtain call of life, or is dying rather a *rite of passage* from this world to a new mode of existence? As we keep the remembrance of all our faithful departed in this month of November, solemnly inscribing their names on the November lists, and as the present liturgical year ebbs away and yields to a new season of Advent, we are given another opportunity to consider death and life in the light of the Christ event. Jesus became man, lived and died in full embrace of our human experience, and faced for our sake the terror of death, and conquered its meaninglessness and finality on the cross. In so doing, his deathbed becomes his throne from where he reigns as King, and upon which he crowns the *good news for the poor* he preached from his first sermon in Nazareth onwards. Because of God's saving love, spoken so loudly and without condition in Jesus, death is no longer the last word, but the beginning of a new and vibrant life that will never end.

Keeping this month as a time of commemoration, and remembering the fallen in the wars this Sunday reminds us of course of lives cut down in their prime. But in eternity it is not so much the timing of our death but the quality and fullness of our lives here and now, in our struggles for peace, justice and mercy and all the other elements of Christ's beatitudes which are enjoined on us, which truly matter. It is the giving of our lives for our brothers and sisters, whether suddenly or over a long period of time which brings forth the cry that there is *no greater love*; in so dying and in so living we are following Christ.



May the light of Christ,
rising in glory,
dispel the darkness
of our hearts and minds.

[Easter Vigil Liturgy]

When Paul the Pharisee became Paul the Christian, he spent his life in sharing the good news that the "sting of death" had now been removed. We have had a wonderful liturgical year, Sunday by Sunday exploring the Gospel of Luke with its continual and unapologised-for demonstrations of the incarnation of Good News for the Poor. The whole narrative moves *like a journey,* to Jerusalem, where the bringer of the good news sacrifices himself, lays down his life for his beloved flock, and in so doing opens the path to life without end. It falls to John the Evangelist to proclaim that whoever hears the word of God and brings it to expression in their life has passed from death to life already:

> "I tell you most solemnly, whoever listens to my words
> and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life;
> without being brought to judgement
> he has passed from death to life" [John 5: 24].

One of my favourite moments in the liturgical year is when, at the Easter Vigil, the candle is prepared and the celebrant announces:

> *Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and end, Alpha and Omega;*
> *all time belongs to him and all the ages.*

In that great Vigil we celebrate in a once-a-year way the same mystery we announce and keep sacred in every Mass: that we are conformed to Him in his life, death and resurrection, and are destined for a heavenly eternity.