



Homily during the funeral of +Daniel Holland (06/11/2017 ns)

By his father

Why do we pray for the dead? How do we remember the dead?

July 20, 2017 (ns), St Nicholas Orthodox Church, McKinney, TX

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. I've written out only two sermons in my life. This is the second one, and the reason why is because I wanted to be able to say things and be able to get through them. The first sermon I ever said, where I had written almost all of it out, was for a wedding, of my daughter and Matthias, and it was a joyous occasion, and I had specific things I wanted to tell them, and I did not want my emotions to interfere with those things I wanted to say. This, too, is a joyous occasion. There's tears of sadness, but there's been great blessing.

This past week, after his 13th day, there have been miracles that have occurred in human hearts. That's the most important thing. And so, it would be inappropriate to be sad. Now, to cry, to miss him — that's human. Our Lord cried. But to be sad — that would be inappropriate. That would not be Christian: to mourn as if we have no hope¹. We can't do that; that's not Christian. So, I want to tell you sort of the traditional things you say — a eulogy — a little bit about my son Daniel, but mostly I want to tell you some things about how we pray, because most people in this church are not Orthodox, and ever since I became a priest all I want to do is tell people about what is true.

My son and I actually sort of had ongoing conflict about this, to be honest with you, in that he always had these solutions to things, to world problems. Everybody says that he wanted to change the world, and he did. So did I, when I was his age. And he had much of the same ideas I had when I was younger, to do something political or economic or social, but, because of my experience, the solutions offered to him were always religious. That is the only way I know how to relate to anything, so we had a little conflict about that, but I think he understands me now.

So, I want to tell you: Daniel had a deep heart. That's a scriptural term from the Psalms². It means that a man has a heart that is deep enough for God. That's pretty deep. And the reason he had a deep heart was because he was kind. Those who knew him well will agree with me emphatically. My son was kind, to anyone: a two-year-old baby, an 85-year-old man, a street beggar or musician, someone having trouble. He was kind.

He was also 20, and that is a dangerous age.

I'm going to tell you the best way to mourn him, to remember him, to honor his memory.

First a little bit about his faith, our faith. We don't say when someone dies, that he's in heaven, or he's in glory now. We don't say that, and the reason we don't say that is because of humility, because we recognize that within us is the potential — not only the potential but the actual — of the great and the terrible. Sometimes in the same day, in the same moment, in the same breath, we can do something great and something profane. All of us have this capacity in us for greatness, for holiness, for purity, and also for depravity. So, we're humble when we approach our God, not that we think that we're condemned, but that we're humble so we don't *presume* upon God. God is merciful, but it's *His* business how He gives Himself to us, not our business. And it's not our business to know His ways.

It's inappropriate to question God as to why my son died at 20 years old. It's human to wonder, it's human to be confused, but it's inappropriate at the depth of your being to question God. So, we don't say, "He's just with the angels now," although some of us believe it. We recognize that since he is a man and has sins as well as virtues, that we must approach God with a sense of humility, so we quietly and not brazenly hope for his blessed repose and reception into the light of God.

And this word, "**hope**" — people in America don't know what hope means. They say, "I hope I get a good grade on a test." That's incorrect. That's not the biblical, Christian understanding of hope. The Christian understanding of hope is to know something's going to happen and to wait for it and to yearn for it. Hope is not where you are not sure or you don't know; hope is where you are waiting, and it's something you want with all of your heart. So, we have that hope, but we're quiet about it; we're not brazen about it. That's why we pray for our loved ones.

All the prayers for the dead, if you listen carefully, pretty much every single one had this basic form: "*I am a sinner. I am unworthy, but Thou art merciful.*" "I am a sinner. I am unworthy" — or if we're praying in his name, where we say, "He is a sinner. He is unworthy. And yet thou art merciful." Every single one of our prayers is like this. And if it doesn't say it exactly, the spirit is there. That's how we pray. We pray with humility when we approach God, because there's so much that we don't know. We don't know things about ourselves or about others or about God, so we're humble.

Now, I know this is a hard saying — Scripture has that term — for some of you who were raised with the idea that a person dies and automatically you say, "They're in glory. They're saved." We don't say that. It's not that we believe that our loved one is not saved, but we have the common sense, the humility, to know that we have sins, and he has sins, and therefore we should approach God in a quiet way, not in a brazen way as if we deserve anything. We deserve nothing. We deserve death. But God loves us; he made us for life. He didn't make us to die, but we have to have the humility to know that the things that we do are deserving of death.

We pray for the dead, really, for one reason. My children know this answer and people in my church know this answer, and there's only one reason why we pray for the dead: *because we love them*. God is love, and therefore we do things because of love. Period. Not because we think our prayers do a certain thing or alleviate a certain problem. We pray because of love. It's the same for any prayer. You pray for someone who has cancer; you pray because of love. Maybe God will bring that person healing, or maybe not, and maybe the best thing would be for that person to suffer a little and die. It's a hard thing to understand, but God knows these things.

We pray because of love, not really so much because we're trying to get a particular outcome, as if we're saying, "God, if I can give you enough of this stuff, will you trade with me the thing that I want?" We pray because of love, and we don't stop loving somebody because they're dead. What a crazy idea! We don't forget them. We can't forget Daniel. We haven't stopped loving him. We haven't forgotten him. We prayed for him before, and we pray for him even more after. We just pray. We give alms. We try to live righteously, because of love.

The Scripture says, "Love is patient; love is kind."³ So therefore we pray, we give alms in his name, because of love, because we want what is good for him, not really understanding exactly how things work out and all the exact stuff that's going on in the afterlife and everything. You can't make a PowerPoint slide out of it. It's not possible. We can't understand what happens. We only have sort of a little glimpse in, sort of like looking through a little hole in a fence and you're watching something: you see only a little bit.

But we pray because we love, and we're patient because part of love is patience, and we don't expect God to give us all this information, give us a special audience and tell us exactly what's going on and how things are shaping up. We don't deserve to know that, and even if God told us, we would not understand, because these are things way too high for our limited intellect, that is, if our intellect is limited by sin. I'm not talking about brainpower here; I'm talking about the soul, and very few of us have the capacity to understand, when God visits us with information of this kind of nature, about the next life.

I want to give you some examples of our prayer, and the reason I want to do that is because, although this is a funeral for my son who lies in the grave now — or I suppose almost in the grave — my heart goes out to you, that some of you would see that these prayers ring true. And if they ring true, then there's implications to their ringing true. These are actually mostly from what we call an Akathist.

One line says, "**Jesus, may good deeds be multiplied in his name.**"

So, we should multiply good deeds now in his name. *That's a fundamental principle* of praying for the dead and loving the dead. You do good deeds in his name. Daniel was kind and would go to any beggar and talk to him as well as give him money. So, don't pass by a beggar. Daniel was very patient in talking with people. He had an incredible capacity to listen to somebody and not interrupt them. Which one of us does that? Very few of us. So, we should do good deeds, whether it be those things or whether it be giving alms or whether it be visiting prisons, whether it just be being kinder to the people around you and not gossiping about them—you do good deeds in his name and multiply good deeds.

Another verse says, "**Jesus, may the labors of those who loved him serve for the salvation of thy servant, Daniel.**"

There's another principle in our prayer and remembrance of the dead. With God, it kind of all mixes together. He sees the past, the future, and the present as one thing. We see it in a line, linearly, but really God sees it all at once, so we labor because we love Daniel. If you love Daniel and you say that he was an amazing man and all those sorts of things, but you don't labor to do something different in your life, then it doesn't matter what you say, at all. You have to labor based upon your love for him, and also for his salvation and for yours.

"Jesus, hear his heart-filled cry, offered by our own lips."

Daniel's lips are no longer open. He can't speak in this world, so we spoke for him today.

"Jesus, in our tears, accept his repentance."

In a way that we don't understand — it tries to get defined by other people, but we don't define it — in a way that we don't understand, sometimes our repentance is incomplete before we die. We don't understand how it really works out, but we as the living pray for the dead, and the dead then pray for the living. We, in our tears today, are asking God to accept *his* repentance, *his* cry in his last moments of his life.

"Jesus, through the intercession of all thy saints, grant him the grace of prayer for the living."

If we pray for the dead and the dead are in blessedness, they hear those prayers, and they pray for us. Some of us have a quiet confidence that Daniel might be able to hear those prayers and pray for us, but we're not going to shout it out like it's some sort of front-page headline. We're going to quietly think, but we're also going to labor. It's not any good to think something is already done, and then you get lazy. It's not good to be lazy, so we're going to pray and we're going to struggle. We're going to try to multiply good deeds.

Then there is a little longer verse that's very beautiful: "**Let us pray with tears while the memory of the one who has fallen asleep is painfully fresh**" — so it's pretty painful; it's still very fresh for us — "**Let us remember his name day and night, giving alms, feeding the hungry, crying from the depths of our souls: Alleluia!**"

That's how you honor my son. Not by coming up and saying, "My condolences." You can say that, but the way you honor someone that you have loved is to try to emulate them.

I will tell you that there are promises I have made to my son. There's basically a formation period this year that has gotten me ready for the death of my son. I didn't even know it was happening. Basically, the last six months have been this accelerated sort of change, for the Lord to get me ready and probably other people in different ways to get ready.

I'll tell you one more prayer that expresses our feeling that we are unworthy and yet we are exalted at the same time. It was in the canon. It was in, I believe, the first ode that Vladyka read:

"Thou who adornest all things has created me, a human creature, a mixture of the lowly and the exalted together. Wherefore, O Savior, give rest to the soul of thy servant, Daniel."

I've already told you about what to do. We honor Daniel by honoring him in word and deed, not just by memories of good times, but by memories of goodness: His deep heart, his patience, his kindness, his interest in everyone. Love does not forget and love makes promises. So those who love Daniel, if you love him in a Christian way, you'll make promises. You'll say, "Daniel, I will pray for you," and you'll do it. "Daniel, I'm going to be more kind to people that I'm normally not kind to" — and you'll do it. Love makes promises, so you promise — whatever your heart tells you to promise. You promise certain prayers, giving of alms, etc.

I'll only make one more mention, and that is we have something called "Daniel's List."⁴ My son was very, very generous, and if he had lived to be 30, to be 40, to be 50, I think I know exactly he would have turned out to be. Therefore, we have created a foundation. We don't really know exactly what we're going to do with it yet, but he was so generous with people, we're going to take that money and we're going to give it to whatever need there is, in his name. We will be multiplying good deeds in his name. Whatever goes in there, we will have it go out: to those who have needs, to those who cross our path.

We also have something called "Daniel's List"⁵ — the same name, but it's a list of names that we pray for, sort of associated with Daniel. When we came, my wife and Christina, and I, when we went to Berlin, we had only known our son was dead for a small amount of time, and we didn't know he was dead for 36 hours, so we didn't find out for 36 hours later. That crushed us. I couldn't pray for my son on the day of his repose because I didn't know he was reposed. When we got to Berlin, it was really tough. I was the least put-together of everybody. And there was great kindness among the people of Berlin. A priest, Fr. Andrei, very kind, very helpful, not just in terms of getting stuff done for us, but in terms of sharing our sorrow — in a Christian way, not just saying, "I'm sorry for you," but in a Christian way, sharing our sorrow and doing something about it. He's on the list as someone who has been kind.

We have these categories: those who have been kind, those who have lost someone, those who pray for +Daniel.

We are aware of people that have lost someone in a sudden, terrible way, like our son Daniel. I know of one story: a woman, she was pregnant and was almost ready to give birth, and she went somewhere in a car and was in an accident and lost the baby. She was so injured —she's perfectly fine now, but at the time she wasn't — she was so injured she could not see the stillbirth; she could not hold her stillborn baby; she could not be at his funeral, but her father was there, and her father, with his hands, held his grandson, Adam, in his hands. His father was ardently pro-abortion — we Orthodox Christians, we are not — and he was ardently pro-abortion, but when he saw this baby, this dead boy, his blood in his hands, he became ardently pro-life, and he changed his whole life. So out of something terrible, something good happened. And we pray for her, we pray for her son, Adam.

So that's Daniel's foundation and also Daniel's list in prayer. That's part of our effort, as a family, to multiply good works in his name. So, I would ask you: the little thing that people get in funerals... I used to go to funerals, Roman Catholic funerals — the little card, right? Some saint on the front, and then a little thing on the back. Well, this is more. This was all our own labor, and we printed it out. It has a little bit of this and a little bit of that, but the

most important thing in there is the insert⁶. The insert is a prayer for a departed person, and I would ask you, especially during Daniel's 40 days, to pray that prayer. It might be a little odd to some of you, but pray that prayer.

Remember that we pray because we love, and dead people are deserving of our love as well as those who are still living in the flesh. Besides, Daniel's not dead, because his soul lives. Eventually his soul will be reunited with his body. We read about that in Thessalonians⁷. So, if you only want to pray for living people, Daniel still fits that category, because his soul is alive. I believe on July 20 will be his 40th day, and we will commemorate him all throughout and then a special commemoration on that day. And I would ask you: take that insert and use it. See what happens. See if anything happens to you, if you say that prayer enough times.

I thank you for loving my son, for respecting him. It means a lot to us, that so many people loved him. We loved him. We're going to miss him terribly. I mean, it's very hard. It's very hard, but it was God's time. I can't go further on, because I go on too far. My wife says I go too far. But there are things that happened on his death that show that the Mother of God was embracing us from the time before his birth, through his life, and into his death. So, I can't go into those technical details, because it would be a 42-minute sermon instead of 22, but I've written a lot about it, and probably the vast majority of you, Bishop Peter notwithstanding, because he doesn't look at Facebook, but other people, most of us, you've probably seen, and if you haven't, then write me and ask, and I'll tell you⁸.

I have an ulterior motive. I'm just going tell you flat-out. It's not a hidden motive. There's no hidden agenda here. The Orthodox Church is the truth. I want to tell everybody about the truth. So, if you want to know it, you ask me. Thank you for loving my son and for honoring his memory. May God bless you and help you in all things. And may we all find paradise. Amen.

This homily is available in audio and text:

Audio: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/funeral_2017+daniel-holland.mp3

HTML: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/funeral_2017+daniel-holland.html

Word Doc format: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/funeral_2017+daniel-holland.doc

PDF format: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/funeral_2017+daniel-holland.pdf

+Daniel's memorial page (<http://orthodox.net/daniel>) has information about +Daniel, resources and teaching about prayer for the dead, dying, etc., Daniel's list and more.



L, R: Daniel at about age 11, with his mother and father. He had this picture on his phone. He saved it in a very low-tech way. He took a picture of Marina's computer screen. We would like to think that he looked at it often.; Marina at the grave, talking to and praying for +Daniel

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:13 “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.”

² A man shall draw nigh, and the heart is deep; and God shall be exalted. (Psalm 63:6b-7a, Septuagint, Boston Psalter)

³ 1 Corinthians 13:4 DRB “Charity (love) is patient, is kind: charity envieth not, dealeth not perversely, is not puffed up...”

⁴ <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/daniels-memorial-foundation.html>

⁵ <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/dyptichs-daniels-list.html> Also (and more up to date than the HTML)

<http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/dyptichs-daniels-list.doc> & <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/dyptichs-daniels-list.pdf>

⁶ This is the insert referred to: <http://www.orthodox.net/trebnic/prayer-for-every-departed-person-in-the-psalter.html> or
<http://www.orthodox.net/trebnic/prayer-for-every-departed-person-in-the-psalter.doc> or <http://www.orthodox.net/trebnic/prayer-for-every-departed-person-in-the-psalter.pdf>

⁷ See Thessalonians 4

⁸ seraphim@orthodox.net or on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/priestseraphim.holland>