The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed is for many a treasured part of the church calendar. A special time to remember those much loved and missed. It’s special because in hearing their names read out; we’re somehow drawn closer to them and remember that though they have gone from our sight they’re still part of our lives. They’re not forgotten.

Yet there is more to this commemoration than that. It’s also about seeing their lives as part of something much bigger, the story of our salvation made known in Jesus Christ.

The combination of these two elements, remembering those whom we love and seeing their death within the context of our faith challenges us to ask how the dying and our understanding of it through the lens of faith change our living?

This may at first seem like an odd thing to say, yet our faith is rooted in the midst of this paradox, where death brings new life. We all know that Christ’s death wasn’t an end but a new beginning; his dying changed our living for ever. So the death of whom we love can transform our living too.

At first in the midst of grief that transformation can seem like a distant dream, yet as the harshness of pain becomes less acute we do come to see things differently.

Consequently tonight isn’t really a morbid nod in the church calendar to the last great enemy of death but a joyful celebration in the new life that those who have gone before us now enjoy.

Death then though it can be painful to watch is a new beginning and this knowledge should change our living.

In the Old Testament Book of Wisdom we heard how ‘In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died’ and yet ‘they are at peace.’ And then ‘in the sight of many they have been punished their hope is full of immortality.’

Death brings an obvious end yet an end not without hope. It seems remarkable that the writer of this book, writing as he was without the fullness of knowledge Christ came to bring had such a depth of clarity in his words.
Years later St. Peter, writing through the lens of his life with Christ, was able to put it like this ‘By his great mercy we have been born anew into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for you.’

This is one of my favourite passages from scripture, filled with confidence and hope and helping us look beyond the sometimes overwhelming power of grief to a new hope, a new inheritance won through Christ out of love.

So how does this hope change our living? Primarily, it’s about confidence. Let’s explore that a bit.

“I confidently predict that tomorrow will be Wednesday” You would put money on that prediction for you’d be confident that it will come true.

“I’m confident that in four years time Barrow AFC will be in the Premier League” now that’s another matter, blind optimism you might say.

What about this “I’m confident that at our death we go to rest with Christ awaiting in his presence the future transformation of the earth and the living and the dead” Now that’s more difficult, there might be a “yes but”.

If so then be reminded of the complete lack of hesitation we find on this subject in the New Testament. There scripture speaks confidently of a radically new vision of life and death. Read prayerfully these words breathe confidence into our doubting souls.

Peter and the others had witnessed for themselves Christ’s resurrection. They had seen his lifeless body put in the tomb yet they had also been with him when he ate with them on the shores of the sea, his radiance visible to all.

Just imagine for a moment if you’d been there with them, sometimes that vision seems so far off, especially at a time of sadness. Yet every Easter we invited to experience this journey for ourselves, to re-enter the great three days when we’re reminded of Our Lord’s great triumph over a death, a triumph open to all who believe and trust in him.
Consequently as we remember Peter’s experience it’s worth hearing his words again ‘By his great mercy we have been born anew into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for you.’

Is it then quite so surprising that this confidence should shape our living, especially when it comes to dealing with the sometimes grim reality of dying, a process that can be so hard to watch.

Our faith can and does make it bearable and your experiences so often confirm it. Some of you have been able to cope with great suffering through the faith that shapes both the future and the present. We live then with great confidence grounded in Christ’s victory over death and the promise that victory brings to us all.

So whilst we’re here to remember the faithful departed we do so knowing too how their dying can help shape our living, this isn’t a day to be consumed with grief but one to be renewed in hope.