RECEIVED WITH THANKS

Somewhere among my ancestors, there is a person with an exceptionally large head. I come from a long line of people with exceptionally large heads.
Our doctor told me that my head size and the head size of my eldest son are in the top 1% of this whole country. A dubious distinction, would you not say?
I cheered up thought when I read a book about George Eliot- the famous writer. Apparently her head measured twenty-two inches round, which is quite large and the book suggested that this superior size of head was due to the superior size of brain. George Eliot had twenty-two inches worth of intellectual brilliance. Out of curiosity, I picked up a tape and measured my head. It is twenty-three inches. Say no more……
To be honest, I could do without the large head. It accounts for a certain clumsiness and lack of co-ordination in movement, plus you can never get a hat to fit. It is a good job I am not in a church where women have to cover their heads or I would just have to wear the drawing-room curtains to church every Sunday. Whichever ancestor bequeathed the large head, I wish they had not.

On the other hand, thinking of ancestors, there must have been one somewhere who loved music because most of my immediate family are musical. There was one of whom I have heard, many generations ago who was known to be extremely talented. Legend has it that he kept a greengrocers shop in the East End of London and he had such a glorious singing voice that wealthy aristocrats would drive down to the East End in their carriages just to hear him sing. The problem was that he would only sing when he was drunk. … But I get great delight both from listening to and trying to play good music. So whichever ancestor bequeathed the music- I am glad they did.

Ancestors are like this. They leave you things you are deeply thankful for, like musical appreciation or beautiful silver. And they leave you things you wish they had not, like an extra-large head or a hideous china vase. That's life.
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The Jewish people of Jesus' day had inherited a mixed bag of gifts from their ancestors and this was what that argument we heard had been all about. On the one hand, they had inherited faith, courage, wisdom and solidarity from the people of their past. They were a holy nation, a just nation, a nation which had fought to keep its identity and hold its faith through centuries of oppression. They came from great stock and Jesus deeply respected his people for this.
But on the other hand they had also inherited a strong racial prejudice against all other nationalities; a religious arrogance which admitted no new ideas whatsoever; a love of power- which, when it could not be used politically, was used in social and religious circles, making them very hard on each other; and also a strong sense of guilt over the failure of their nation, which made them very hard on themselves. And all of this, Jesus found deeply frustrating.

A vital part of his ministry was trying to set his people free from the burdens of their past. But they could not see that they had a problem. *Abraham is our father, which means that we can do no wrong. Who do you think you are? You are just a wandering preacher from the dubious end of the country.*
When Jesus tries to tell them that, as the one sent from God, he is the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams of all their people down the centuries, from Abraham onwards, they

laugh at him- *how old are you? How can Abraham possibly have known about you all those hundreds of years ago?* Jesus answers them by making his most audacious claim ever: *Before Abraham was, I AM. I AM:* the holy name for God, so sacred that no-one dared speak it aloud. Jesus was openly claiming that he was God, which was why the people wanted to stone him for blasphemy.

The faith of their ancestors- that belief in God, that longing to know God- had been thwarted by the religious arrogance of their ancestors, which failed to see God, even when he was right there standing in front of them.
We do get a mixed bag of treasures from those who have gone before us.
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It is just the same in the church. Here, we are the product of Christians who were prepared to suffer imprisonment and death for the sake of freedom in their beliefs and in the way they worshipped God. We are also the product of people who were motivated towards Free Churches for social and political rather than religious reasons. We have ancestors who gave lovingly and generously to build churches and support ministries. And we have ancestors who used their money to "buy the church" and make it what they wanted it to be. There have been those in the past who have been pioneers, promoting new ways of working and worshipping and those who have wanted only to maintain the status quo. All of this, the good and the bad has come down through us because that is how life works.

I remember one very fine Christian man in my first church. He was a scholar and a gentleman, an ordained Elder and an accredited Lay Preacher. He came from a long line of committed non-conformist Christians and he was a pillar of the local church. But he could not support the cause of Christian Unity: of working and worshipping with other denominations. *They were the persecutors,* he would shout. *How can we even think of being in league with them?*
I came to understand why he felt so strongly. There was a book written about a notorious court case in the nineteenth century concerning his grandfather, a non-conformist minister, who had had the gates of the parish graveyard locked against him by the parish priest, when he came there with the coffin of a dead child. This was the kind of memory to leave a deep scar on future generations.

And we find these scars not only in the Christian church but in people of all religions whose ancestors suffered at the hands of others.
We see these scars in racial groups who have generations of hatred and prejudice bred into them. People get frustrated for example, that the legalised ending of apartheid in South Africa has failed to produce a peaceful, happy society all at once. Why is there still so much hatred and violence? You cannot erase all those years of injustice and segregation simply by changing the law.

As a Minister with the privilege of conducting funeral services, I am constantly made aware that every death leaves unfinished business behind. There will inevitably be issues unresolved during a person's lifetime and those involved with that person will be left with these issues: a difficult relationship perhaps that never reached a good understanding; a family division that was never reconciled; an unfairness in the leaving of resources which cannot now be explained; something that hurt the person you loved and their pain is bequeathed to you; an ambition that was never realised by

them and their frustration is bequeathed to you; a crying need in their existence which you were unable to meet, so guilt is bequeathed to you.
Life and death are never neat and tidy, whether you are thinking as an individual or as a community.
No-one, said L.M. Montgomery, *can be free who has a thousand ancestors.*
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It is a good thing that the Christian church got into the habit of celebrating an annual festival of All Saints: a little time to reflect on the people of past and to explore some of the unfinished business. For today I chose that reading from St Paul's letter to the church in Corinth- his famous "hymn to love."
You see, Paul was a man who had had to grapple with his past. Born into a long line of orthodox Jews he found it very hard, despite his dramatic conversion to Christianity, to turn his back on the faith and culture of his ancestors. There are long discussions in several of his letters which show him trying to reconcile the beliefs and practices of the Jews with the beliefs and practices of the Christian church. And not only did he have his own conscience to deal with; he was also called upon to referee the fierce, acrimonious arguments between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians each of whom had their own baggage from their own past to contend with.
And life was short- much shorter in those days.
And life was cheap, as both politics and religion were used to justify random killing.
Paul wondered if he was ever going to get things sorted out. Would he succeed in freeing up the church to get on with what it was there for: bringing the love of Jesus to the world? Could he enable his people to lay the past to rest or would he leave them with more unfinished business? Paul came close to despair on many occasions. He could see no way through this tangle of past history and its effect on present life.

Then he wrote this great hymn to the power of love. He was not talking sentimental love here, "fluffy love," hugs- and- kisses love. He was talking about a seriously creative power, the very passion of God himself for the human race. And without this passion, nothing would be worth doing. As he said:
Impressive words, without true love, are nothing but noise;
Heroic actions, without real love, are nothing but play-acting;
Generosity in giving, without deep love, is nothing but attention-seeking;
And none of this lasts. Words and actions die with the person concerned. Only love – this deep passion, if it exists – will remain.

Paul was not talking either about the emotion that remains in people left behind when someone dies. Of course we continue to feel love for those whom we have lost and in that sense, yes, love goes on. But, as I have said, we also continue to feel anger, guilt and pain which have been inspired by those no longer with us. This is not what Paul is talking about here.
He is talking of those who have moved on through life, through death and into eternity. For them, he says, there is now only love left in their existence. Everything else about them has gone but love remains. *As we live now,* he wrote, *we see life and God like poor reflections in a dim mirror. We cannot see clearly. But then we shall see face to face. We shall know- everything. We shall understand- perfectly because the love of God will be made perfect in us.*
Do you understand what he is saying? He is saying that those who now live in the everlasting life of God can only feel love; they understand everything about life

through this love. So if, as the Bible says, they remain in some way connected to us, around us, above us, then what they offer to us is this gift of love. They cannot touch us with pain or hatred or anger or guilt because they can no longer feel those things. They can only feel love and with this great, passionate divine love extended to us comes the power of healing, of forgiveness and of renewal. The only treasure our ancestors are capable of giving us now is this treasure of love.
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It is an awesome thought, is it not? And it opens up the possibility of tremendous freedom. Our ancestors cannot help the fact that they bequeathed burdens as well as gifts to us. They were only human, as we are human and they did not fully understand what they were doing. But now they can offer us our freedom from these burdens because they are caught up in the all-powerful, all-forgiving, all-renewing love of God. There is no need for us to keep old prejudice alive out of loyalty to our ancestors because that is not what they want. There is no need for us to be crippled with guilt because that is not what they ask of us. There is no need for us to be scared of leaving old ways and trying new because their love will still support us.

St Paul did not live to a ripe old age. The Romans eventually found a good enough reason to have him executed. And he left behind a church that was still pretty chaotic and volatile: lots of people with different ideas and a large selection of spiritual baggage from their past. But he was not afraid and he was not despairing. Because he knew now that where there was that power of love, pure, passionate, life-giving love that was of God himself, the church in its essence would never be destroyed and that he, Paul, would remain connected to that church for ever. And where there was none of this love- then no matter how impressive a building or how large a congregation- there was no lasting treasure worth saving anyway.

In a strange dream he had of the end of time, St John heard Jesus say to him, "*Don't be afraid. I am the first and the last. I am the beginning and the end."* The festival of All Saints is a timely reminder that all people come from God and return to God. And if God's nature is love: life-giving, healing, renewing, passionate love, then all are caught up in that love and held in that love through life, through death and beyond death. Our saints hold out to us the gift of love. Let us receive it, with thanks.
Amen.