

Mourners Hold Vigil for Previously Unrecognized Dead

In the News

Activists held a vigil on November 18 in Southwark, England, seeking to gain official recognition for Crossbones Graveyard as a shrine. The last burial at the unconsecrated cemetery for medieval prostitutes, paupers and convicts took place in 1853, when there was no more room for additional bodies at the site. Of the 15,000 corpses buried there, about 9,000 are thought to be children.

For the past three years, activist group Friends of Crossbones has partnered with Bankside Open Spaces Trust, which holds a lease on the property, to develop the land as green space for the community and protect the graves. The group envisions offering guided tours, talks and performances as well as monthly "Vigils for the Outcast" at the site, which has been renamed "Crossbones Garden," where the forgotten outcasts of society can be honored along with others who have died.

The neighborhood where the Garden of Remembrance is located was once the overcrowded, disease-infested slum home to the working poor, criminals, and "single women," a.k.a. "Winchester Geese," who were sex workers licensed by the Bishop of Winchester for the purposes of taxation.

These women seem to have been treated with a mixture of disdain and grudging tolerance as the lesser evil compared to same-sex relations or masturbation, which the church viewed as mortal crimes. The church did not permit such women to be buried in consecrated ground, so they were laid to rest where they worked.

During the service, mourners read the names of the dead, some from centuries past, others from recent days and months. Then they tied ribbons with those names to the garden gates, already decorated with mementos, photos and candles.

"A man unknown from the workhouse, Dec. 4, 1729"

"Timothy — son and brother, 2016"

"Grant Burford, friend of the outcast, friend of Crossbones, April 18, 2017"

"Tyson Highness, Sept. 27, 2016, was killed, shot dead in the Netherlands"

Tyson was Maggie's 26-year-old son, "a sort of outcast," she said, not a criminal, but "a dancer and kickboxer." She felt comfortable coming to Crossbones to grieve, where people of any or no religion gather to mourn those the world seems to have forgotten.

The vigil at Crossbones reminds us that cemeteries for Jane and John Does dot the landscape all around the world. Some lie in unmarked mass graves, others in numbered plots.

In one such anonymous grave, Sylvia Nolan found the son who had been missing for 15 years. A rising track star, 18-year-old LeRyan "Flagpole" Nicholson grew up with his two younger sisters in a public housing project in North Nashville, Tennessee. Troubled by mental illness, he dropped out of school, struggling to get his GED and vocational training. In April 1998, he left home for the last time and was never heard from again.

Nolan looked for him without success for 15 years, never knowing that he had been buried as "John (19) Doe" in Grave 555, the 19th unidentified man in Bordeaux Cemetery, only three miles from her home. He had been murdered, his body wrapped in a carpet and set on fire on a dead-end street next to Mt. Bethel Baptist Church Christian Center.

Police detectives finally matched Nicholson's DNA to the murder victim, using technology and a data base that was unavailable in the 1990s. Nolan didn't get the answer she was hoping for, but at least now she knew where her son was.

Not long after, Nolan replaced the "John (19) Doe" headstone with one marked, "LeRyan Nathaniel Nicholson, 1979 – 1998."

"No telling how many stories are in those graves," she said. Stories of outcasts, unknown, forgotten, yet missed, mourned, and beloved.

It's easy for us to turn our backs on those that don't fit in to our views of what a good member of society should look like. This Rise and Shine, let's discuss what it would be like for us to make space for the outcasts in our lives.

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 3:22-24

Then the LORD God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (For context, read 3:1-13, 20-24.)

After the first man and woman disobeyed God, eating the forbidden they were thrown out of the garden, becoming the world's first outcasts. But, even in discipline, God was gentle with them. He clothed them in animal skins (v. 21), which required the first sacrifice recorded in scripture. In this we see the cost of their sin as well as God's mercy.

Questions: How does remembering that the first images of humankind presented in the Bible become the first outcasts affect your view on the outcasts of our society. Did Adam and Eve deserve their punishment? Do outcasts today somehow deserve their lot in life?

Genesis 21:17-20

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. (For context, read 21:8-20.)

God had promised to give Abraham a son by his wife Sarah when both were in their old age. As time went on and she didn't get pregnant, she gave her maid-servant Hagar to Abraham to serve as a surrogate, so that she might get a son through her. Hagar did bear a child, Ishmael, but he was not the child God had promised.

Afterwards, Sarah did get pregnant and gave birth to Isaac, the son God had promised Abraham. Out of jealousy Sarah asked Abraham to cast out Hagar and her son. Sarah's request distressed Abraham, but God assured him that he would care for Ishmael and make of him a great nation as well. So, Abraham gave Hagar provisions and sent her away with the boy.

When their provisions ran out, Hagar placed her son under a bush and sat away at a distance, so that she wouldn't have to watch him die. But God heard their cries for help, provided for their needs, and watched over Ishmael as he grew up.

In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul uses the story of Hagar to say that the Gentile believers reading his letter were "children of the promise, like Isaac" (v. 28). Some Jewish believers may well have been angered by Paul's message at the time, but the Celts reading the letter, who were outsiders in the larger Roman

culture as well as the inherited culture of the Hebrew scriptures, probably liked the feeling of being included as mainline Christians.

Questions: With whom do you most identify in the story? What does it mean when people who seem to be close to God are the very ones who are most inhospitable? What does the story of Hagar and Ishmael have to say to those who have been cast out today?

Hebrews 13:12-13

Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. (For context, read 13:10-14. See also John 19:16-20.)

Jesus was crucified at "The Place of the Skull," from the Aramaic word "Golgotha," near Jerusalem. It was probably so named since it was a place of execution where bones of dead criminals were scattered.

According to Jewish law, the death penalty and burials were only permitted "outside the camp" (Numbers 15:35-36). In addition, sacrifices for sin such as those offered on the Day of Atonement were to be carried outside the city, where they were burned entirely (Leviticus 16:27).

Questions: How does the fact that Jesus was despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3), cast out in life and in death, uniquely qualify him as the Savior, especially of forgotten outcasts?

How can we "go to him outside the camp" today? Where will we find him? And how can we "bear the abuse he endured"?

Prayer for the Poor and Neglected (BCP p.826)

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*