

Column

On one visit to London's famed Westminster Abbey, a young boy seeing my clerical attire asked: "Are people really buried here?" "They certainly are," I answered. He ran off excitedly to tell his mother.

Later, out of curiosity, I did some research and found that the mortal remains of over 3000 people, including 30 kings and queens of England, are tucked away in the recesses of the Abbey. In addition to actual burials, there are over 300 memorial plaques and statues.

Next week, God willing, I shall be travelling to Charleston, S.C., for a meeting. While actual burials in this city seem to be confined to churchyards, an impressive array of memorial plaques can be found on the walls and in the floors of some of the older churches in this city. Some date back to the 1700s. St. Michael's and St. Philip's, in particular, have walls covered with memorials.

Nor are memorials confined to churches of great antiquity. The church I serve in Blue Ridge founded in 1987 has a number of plaques. A new one, slated for installation in early March, will commemorate an organist who served for over 30 years. This one, as with many of those already in place, will have words from scripture appropriate for the person being memorialized.

The question some may ask: Is not the placing of memorials, whether inside or outside a church, a show of worldly pomp and hubris and thus a practice which should be discouraged and avoided? I think my answer would be a cautious, no, and here is why:

Certainly, one can find ugly and ostentatious memorials in some churches and churchyards, ones which seem to point to the wealth and status of a family in the local community. Yet even these instruct those who pass by and view. They say: All is vanity. The well-endowed financially and socially end up in the same place as everyone else. Earthly beauty fades away. Gold perishes at the end of life's day. Prepare to meet thy God!

But, on a more positive note, memorials remind those who pass by and read of a doctrine highlighted in the Apostles' Creed and taught in the scriptures – the communion of saints. This doctrine says the family of God includes the living and the dead. Only a thin veil separates earth and heaven, saints below from saints

above, and this veil sometimes gets pulled back, as in the case with St. John the Divine in Revelation 4. We are part of one great fellowship.

More importantly still, memorial plaques and monuments in and around churches remind the living to carry on to the finish line. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” says the writer of Hebrews (Hebrew 12:1 RSV)

Memorial plaques and monuments are more than superfluous nuisances. Rather, they should be viewed as roadway signs. They are there to warn, instruct and point us to our destination. Don’t pass them by unread and unheeded.

O GOD, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; Grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, The Book of Common Prayer)

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.