

Two Feasts and Hallowe'en

This week we celebrated two important Feasts in the Church: All Saints on 1 November and All Souls on 2 November. In addition, there was Hallowe'en on Wednesday evening, 31 October. What are these Feasts and what is the history of Hallowe'en and its connection to them?

Firstly, let's look at Hallowe'en. Originally, in the Northern Hemisphere, 1 November marked the end of the summer months and the pre-Christian Celts believed that at that time the spirits of the departed returned to their homes to visit loved ones. To frighten off evil spirits who might have been 'hovering', masks and other disguises were worn. Around 610 CE Pope Boniface IV decided to Christianise this festival - just as had happened to the originally pagan Feast which became Christmas - and claim it for Jesus. At that time, a Church Feast celebrating those Christians who had died was observed on 13 May. The pope moved that celebration from that date to 1 November. At the same time, the evening before this Feast was also sanctified as All Hallows' Eve or Hallowe'en. It was a time to remember the faithful believers of past ages and to pray that the living might learn from their good example.

Today Hallowe'en no longer has much to do with honouring the faithful departed and learning from their example and it has lost the Christian focus given to it by Pope Boniface. Some Christians today feel that Hallowe'en is evil. John Dickson, Anglican minister and director of the centre for Public Christianity has this to say: "So, is Halloween today 'evil'? Sure it is, if it involves the glorification of things satanic; even worse if it trivializes the Devil. And there's nothing good in the festival if it revolves around playing nasty pranks on neighbours who forgot to buy sweets. Beyond that, a community dress-up involving opening our doors to each other and giving treats to kids in fancy dress is a lovely idea. It might even build friendships in a society hungry for community." So, amidst the pranks, parties, fun and costumes, it may indeed be possible to find the connectedness we so greatly need.

The Feast of All Saints, also known as All Saints' Day, All Hallows' Day or Hallowmas, is the day after All Hallows' Eve or Hallowe'en. It is celebrated on 1 November by Anglicans and Roman Catholics. This Feast is an opportunity for believers to remember all the saints and martyrs, known and unknown, throughout Christian history. As we celebrate the saints on this day, we think about all those men and women, from way back in the past to those acknowledged in the present time, to whom we look as models and examples of what it means to have faith in God and to live in faithfulness to the teachings and way of Jesus.

Each of us may have a particular saint we admire and whose life speaks to us. If we're Catholic, chances are it's the one we've chosen as our Confirmation saint. Saints come in many shapes and forms but there are a few things they all have in common. They all listened to God calling them in their hearts, drawing them. They said 'yes' to that call. They often made great sacrifices and often endured trials, difficulties and suffering to remain faithful to that 'yes'. And above all, they all developed and nurtured a strong and intimate relationship with God, even though for some of them, they experienced spiritual dryness or darkness for a significant part of their lives. This relationship with God, and often this

faithfulness to God in the darkness of the spiritual desert, kept them going. The lives of the saints offer us inspiration.

On the Feast of All Souls we remember all who are no longer with us. "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die" (Gospel of John), is the promise we hold to. This promise, and our faith in this promise, gives us hope and comfort. It is natural to grieve and two thousand years ago St Paul recognised this when he said: "Grieve - but not as the pagans do, without hope." The Feast of all Souls is about that hope. As we ponder this we are drawn into reflecting on Love, the Love that connects us, deeply and eternally, the Love that nothing can break. St John, in his First Letter, proclaims that "God is love and all who live in love, live in God and God lives in them." It is this same Love we see in the lives of the saints. They give it visible expression in their own time and place. It is this Love that consoles. It is this Love that will never die. It is this love we celebrate in these two great Feasts.

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