

All Saints and All Souls Day: 1 Nov 2020

Revelation 7:9-17

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Halloween has become very BIG. Increasingly in our neighbourhood we see little groups of goulish looking children at our front door looking for treats. Although this year I think there are going to be some fairly dramatic limitations put on this practice due to Covid. It certainly sounds like a potential super-spreader possibility.

The word "Hallowe'en" means "[hallowed](#) evening" or "holy evening". It is the evening before the festivals of All Saints Day, in which we honour the [saints](#) and remember those who have died.

The idea of trick or treating may lie in a tradition dating way back to the 15th century where groups of poor people, often children, would go door-to-door during All-hallow-tide, collecting soul cakes, in exchange for [praying for the dead](#), especially the souls of the givers' friends and relatives. Soul-cakes were little buns, like hot cross buns, marked with the sign of the cross. There are hundreds of other traditions across cultures, some of which date back to the ancient Celts.

As modern people, with our minds dominated by scientific paradigms, we might find all this rather strange. Why would we bother with what looks a bit like superstitious mumbo-jumbo. But perhaps what it does do, is to invite us to think about the nature of time, and our place within it in a different way.

We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals....as self-made people. I once heard an ex-prime minister, Kevin Rudd, say, "I believe in meritocracy". Which basically means 'you get what you deserve'. But the Christian idea of the human person is that our apparent successes and failures are inextricably linked to, and formed by, a rich network of relationships.

I am only standing here because my great grandfather managed to get out of the misery of the Ashington coal mines in the north of England and become an apprentice to a building firm. He then started his own building company, which he handed to my grandfather. And my grandfather and father crossed the world and set up a building company in Adelaide. And because of that my Father met my mother. I'm only standing here because my Mother's ancestors shipped out from Germany a hundred years ago or so.

When aboriginal people meet each other they say, 'where are you from – who is your family'. We are more likely to say, 'what do you do for a living'?

The festival of All Saints draws out attention to particular people who the church invites us to remember frequently because of their admirable lives – lives worth imitating. These saints show up in the Common Lectionary (ref Oxford Dictionary of Saints).

The festival of All Souls reminds us that we carry the stories our ancestors in our genetic code – they beat in our blood. When we start to uncover the layers of stories of our family

systems, we begin to understand ourselves. “We carry within us the wounds and unfulfilled longings and the hopes and dreams of those who have come before us”.

And yet, for the follower of Jesus, we are not *determined* or *scripted* by our ancestors. In Christ we are born into a new and eternal and hopeful future. St. John’s vision which we heard from the Book of Revelation, says, “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new’”. This is not something *just* happening in the future. It is happening now. It is called “Resurrection” in which God has reconciled and healed all brokenness-ness in the person of Christ.

The ‘saint’ is someone who has ‘put on Christ’ (Romans 13:14) as St Paul says. Or John expresses it as a community whose robes have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb, which is a wonderfully paradoxical image. I take it to mean that Christ declared God’s victory over violence. His self-giving.....the shedding of his own blood means that we don’t need to be wearing robes covered with blood. We are made into one humanity which has forsaken killing. The white robes we wear have been washed clean from killing.... Washed clean by baptism....the Living Water of Christ now bursts up within us as a fountain. So there is all this integrated and multi-layered symbolism of cleansing, washing, being freed from sin, death and violence, and being given a new life.

Now uniting ourselves to Christ in his death, is a doorway into new life. In the first few centuries of the church, when Christian nonviolent martyrdom was common, the Saints would embrace death as their access to deeper life. The anniversary of the martyrdom of saint was known as their ‘birthday’. In voluntarily choosing the death of Christ, death no longer has any power, because death itself has become the way to life. As we give our life to Christ, we come to live in the communion of the saints, past, present and yet to come.

Rowan Williams says in one place that Saints are not special by any merit of their own. He says:

“holiness is as little a characteristic of a person as light is of a window....[in the kingdom] change happens not by effort but by absorbing love. The saints Paul writes to are not extra good – they are simply people who have come to live in the vicinity of Jesus” (+Rowan Williams)

When we remember those who have died, and whether we had a terrible relationships with them or a really good one, or something in between, we simply entrust these people to the God who is making all things new.

The Author of the Book of Revelation summarises it this way, “It is done. I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end,...to the one who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life”.

As Saints, we now live in the realm of grace and we hopefully reflect some of that grace to others, like a mirror, or like a window that light is shining through.

Q/Do you perceive yourself to be a Saint? What does being a ‘Saint’ mean to you?