

All Souls 2021

Around this time as we sit down to pray our streets will be starting to populate with little goblins and ghouls, witches and pumpkins. Initially my inner grumpy old man resisted yet another creeping Americanisation of our society. Then I tried to get in touch with a bit more compassion. I realised that a fancy-dress Halloween is simply another attempt for a society to create little rituals of stability to hold at bay the perceived chaos of the world.

Death has always been a mixed bag for humans – the one thing that all humans have in common. The one thing we all share, from the very rich to the very poor. Death is the great leveller. In ancient times it was thought that those who have died can come back to haunt us. If people died on land, then their ghosts could rise from the earth. If people died at sea, it was thought that the spirits would roam across the waters. Dressing up at Halloween and lighting candles was a great communal mocking of the underworld – an attempt to say that the ghosts of the dead had now power over us.

All Hallows Eve is a significant point at which we consciously remember those who have died – the ancestors and friends who have shaped our lives. For Christians we need to have no need to fear the dead. The Christian celebration of All Hallows frequently involved the lighting of candles. This signified that the light of Christ had conquered death – a confidence that physical death was a doorway into new life – a true birth – we which God made us into human beings. The invitation of the Christian faith is to enter that life now rather than waiting for physical death. We do this with our “yes”, our “Amen” to God. This is a new birth now because it means we are no longer forming our identity by reference to other people but are now receiving our identity and value as a gift of the Christlike God.

So, if we want to dress up and mock the fear of death, go right ahead. But in many ways, this is what we do every time we sit down to pray and especially when we break bread. We remember the Good Friday statement, ‘By his death Christ has trampled down death’.

This year, as a little experiment our family has set up a refectory point by our front door. We wrote the prayer for All Souls Day (the one we opened our prayers with today) – we wrote this prayer on a board and put it by the front door. We also printed off some copies and left these for people to take along, with a lit candle, and of course some little packets of sweets. Perhaps, along with snatching the chocolates, someone might pause for a moment, read the prayer. They might briefly be reminded of their loved ones who have died; they might be reminded of their own mortality; and most importantly be reminded of God’s unconquerable love for the cosmos.

Prayer for All Soul’s Day (All Hallows Eve)

We call to mind all those whose lives are done.
We thank you that their time, now completed,
however short or long, sad or joyful,
is gathered up, looked on and known by you.

We offer up remembrance: those whose absence
we feel daily; those who have shaped us;
those who have nurtured us;
the people we are grateful to have walked with;
all those we hardly knew
but wished we’d known better.

We give thanks for all they gave and all the future owes them.
Lord, your love embraces every person
who has ever lived; you promised that you lost none.
May your Spirit make us always thankful
for all our gifts of love and cherished memory.

The Church of England