

Sunday 5 November - All Saints Day

When the Saints . . .

Revelation 7.9–17, 1 John 3.1–3, Matthew 5.1–12

Today we celebrate All Saints Day, or All Hallows, a day when we remember and honour all the saints of the church, known and unknown. We are a great crowd of witnesses, joyfully bound together in Christ, but how that looks in practice can vary a lot. We may worship in different ways, make different decisions in life, and respectfully disagree on many things. But we still stand together with the saints of all ages, strong in faith and in support of one another, one in our commitment to knowing and following Jesus Christ our Lord. We are all on a learning curve when it comes to being saints.

QUESTION Is there someone not here in this church today, whom you may or may not have met personally, whose life or actions or words have encouraged you on your Christian journey?

I would like to look at the saints in the Gospel reading. You have heard this passage often. We talk about the beatitudes, the blessings, the many ways in which we (and others) are blessed. Today I noticed in each of these beatitudes the characteristics of followers of Jesus. They, like we, are the saints, striving for holiness, and blessed wherever or however they are on their spiritual journey.

The poor in spirit place their trust in God, not in their own worthiness. Those who mourn are mourning because they have loved. The meek and those who hunger for righteousness will, by grace, see all that they long for. The merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers delight in doing God's will. Those who suffer for their faith will see the kingdom of heaven.

From Revelation 7.9, There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

From 1 John 3.2b, What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

We walk with God and with one another. We know the love of God in our lives and in God's good time we will know more. Your neighbour may sometimes appear to be walking a different way from you, but if they, and you, walk with God, those paths are going in the same direction, and they will converge and eventually be seen more clearly as the one path.

When we find ourselves in a different place from our fellow Christians, it is good to listen to why they are walking the path that they tread, so that we may discover the common ground that we did not see when we were just looking at our differences.

With some trepidation, I am going to talk about last Tuesday, about Halloween. This seems like a divergence, but it is not, although Christians of all kinds have very different views about it. Their views are so divergent that each group may be tempted to see one way as right and another way as wrong, either universally wrong or simply wrong for them.

Can we understand one another well enough to respect different perspectives, while still making our own choices for ourselves and our families? We will come back to this question.

Halloween is the eve of All Hallows. It is the day before All Saints Day. In popular celebrations, it is often seen through the practice of trick or treating, where children dress up in costumes, knock on doors and chorus, *Trick or treat?* This implies that they will play a trick on the householder unless they get a treat. Today this is a secular practice, despite some early roots in both pagan and Christian traditions. In essence, it is a story of good or bad consequences depending on the actions and intentions of the participants.

Picture, if you will, 3 Christian families. One sees great danger in this practice and seeks to protect their children from it. The second is indifferent, barely notices it, and generally ignores it for themselves and their children. The third family joins in the practice every year and encourages their children to do so. There are, of course, many other variations on these positions.

Let's look at families 1 and 3, at opposite ends of the spectrum. Both are strong in faith and seek to teach their children in ways that nurture them in faith.

Family 1 sees the practice of trick or treat as a sanitised depiction of evil, one that presents evil as harmless fun and thus attracts children to what is ultimately harmful, thinking that it is just a bit of fun. They warn their children that evil can sometimes take forms that seem harmless, but that can be deceptive and, step by step, take them down a path that leads away from faith and denies the victory of the cross and the ultimate defeat of all evil. From Philippians 4, *Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* (Philippians 4.8) and from 1 Thessalonians 5, *Test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.* (1 Thessalonians. 5.21-22)

I believe that these parents are right to teach their children about evil sometimes seeming harmless, and I hope that this parental guidance will help their children to make good decisions when faced with deviations from what they know to be right and good.

Family 3 focuses on loving their neighbour and sees Halloween as a practical exercise in Jesus' instruction to love even our enemies. When offered the choice of trick or treat, they choose to offer the positive response of a treat and possibly a word of admiration for the ghost or angel or whatever costumed figure is at their door. They teach their children Jesus' generosity of action in Matthew 5, *If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.* (Matthew 5.40-41) and that, in the words of Jesus in Luke 5, they should, *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you* (Luke 6.27-28). On Halloween, this translates as treating those who might seek to trick you.

I believe that these parents are right to teach their children about loving their neighbour, even their potentially hostile neighbour, and I hope that this parental guidance will help their children to make good decisions when faced with the temptation to let the intentions and actions of others determine their decisions about what is the right thing to do.

Neither Family 1 nor Family 3 is likely to change their mind about what and how to teach their children at any time or circumstance.

There are other issues around Halloween that could be explored.

- Is it better to curse the darkness or light a candle?ⁱ
- Is dressing as a movie character a positive endorsement of the movie or a criminal infringement of copyright?ⁱⁱ
- What are the issues around working conditions and waste from the manufacture and discarding of Halloween decorations and costumes?
- And ...?

Let's bring together families 1, 2, and 3 with their very different perspectives. We could ask a lot of questions about them, but I will ask you:

QUESTION Coming back to perspectives and choices, what do you think these saints could respect and commend about one other?

You may have a natural inclination towards family 1 or family 3. Or perhaps you align with family 2 and see it all as irrelevant to your life and your faith.

Whatever your inclination, leaving aside Halloween and looking at the fullness of our Christian life, I hope that we can continue to see one another as saints in the making, all on the same journey, following our Lord and Saviour and encouraging one another on the way.

Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in. In the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

ⁱ The earliest appearance found this saying occurred in a 1907 collection titled "The Supreme Conquest and Other Sermons Preached in America" by William L. Watkinson. A sermon titled "The Invincible Strategy" downplayed the value of verbal attacks on undesirable behaviors and championed the importance of performing good works.

ⁱⁱ <https://theconversation.com/dressing-up-for-halloween-you-could-be-in-breach-of-copyright-law-but-its-unlikely-youll-be-sued-215538>