

## Saints and Spirits

On the evening of an October 31 in the 1980s, when I was Rector of Thrapston in Northamptonshire, my front doorbell rang. I opened the door to find a group of giggling young people I knew well. “Trick or treat!” they shouted “What is this nonsense?” I asked, having never come across it before. “You give us a treat, or we shall play a trick on you!” they replied. I told them to leave pronto, and shut the door. Next morning I walked out of my front gate, past the galvanised dustbin I had left out for the dustmen, and found its entire contents had been emptied in a pile on my driveway!

### Hallowe’en

Hallowe’en, the time when children dress up as witches, ghosts and the like, appears to have its origins in pre-Christian Ireland, in the Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced ‘SAHwin’) which marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter. It was believed that, just then, the boundary between this world and the spirit world was particularly thin, and spirits roamed around, frightening people. They feared these spirits might even kidnap an unwary soul and take it back to the spirit world! So people dressed up in various disguises to ‘hide’ from them!

When a large number of the Irish emigrated to North America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century they took with them their Hallowe’en customs. Back in Ireland they had carved faces on turnips, but in America they found an abundance of pumpkins just at Hallowe’en time, so adopted them instead as they were far easier to carve than turnips! In America too the idea of ‘trick or treat’ developed. Then it was surely the media that brought it all to us!

### All Saints’ Day

There had been some observance of a day for all saints before, but it was Pope Gregory IV who, in 834, ordered the general observance of All Saints’ Day on November 1 throughout the Catholic Church. Was it to try to displace unhealthy observances like those of Samhain? In the 10<sup>th</sup> century All Souls’ Day began to be observed on November 2 to commemorate *all* the faithful departed. It is still treated as a festival in some parts of the Christian world - including the Philippines. Not long after Jenny and I became ‘an item’, I was taken off on November 2 with members of her family to a large cemetery, where relatives had been buried, to join in a celebratory dinner around family graves. Awnings were put up to shade us from the sun, and we ate a sumptuous meal. And many others were doing the same. *Being ordained, I was at once chosen to be the family chaplain and to conduct suitable prayers!*

At the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, while All Saints’ Day continued in the Church calendar, All Souls’ Day was dropped. Why? Because the division between:

- ‘All saints’ - apostles, martyrs, monks & nuns, and other devoted Christian people, &
- ‘All souls’ – the rest of us; as the hymn puts it: ‘We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.’

is not biblically valid. Paul, surely a super saint, being an apostle and future martyr, calls *all the members* of the churches he wrote to ‘saints’ (e.g. Eph. 1:1). So he would call us ‘the saints in Henleaze’! The Greek *hagios*, translated ‘saint’, means one set apart, set apart here for the service of Christ. What should be our lifestyle?

## The Christian lifestyle

Some indication is given in our Gospel this morning: Luke 6:20-31, part of the ‘Sermon on the Plain’, Luke’s equivalent to Matthew’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’. We are no doubt surprised to find here Beatitudes rather different from what we’re used to (followed by counterpart Woes): ‘Blessed are you poor,’ ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now’, and so on. Jesus, Luke tells us, was looking directly at his disciples as he spoke. They had left everything to follow him.

But if the poor, the hungry, the sad, and the persecuted are blessed in God’s sight, and he loves them, does he really want them to remain in that deprived state? Surely not. He wants us and others to help them out of their poverty and hunger. Matthew’s version gives a broader perspective to these Beatitudes:

‘Blessed are the poor *in spirit*’ – those who are humble.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*’ – ‘to see right prevail’ (NEB).

Are we characterised by these qualities? Jesus sets us an even greater challenge. After the Beatitudes and Woes in our Gospel, he says: ‘Love your enemies.’ It’s hard enough for us to love our friends and family, but love our enemies? How can we possibly do that? Jesus goes on to tell us: ‘Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...’

Let me close with a story from Eastern Europe in the 1970s (I think from Romania), when Christians were being persecuted and killed by the Communist authorities.

One day a boy of 12 arrived at the HQ of the Secret Police carrying a bunch of flowers and said to the one in charge, “Comrade Captain – you are the one who arrested my father and my mother, and today is my mother’s birthday. I used to buy my mother some flowers on her birthday – but now because of you I have no mother to make happy. My mother was a Christian and she taught me that we must love our enemies and reward evil with good. As I no longer have a mother I thought these flowers might make the mother of your children happy – please give them to your wife.” The Communist torturer broke down and cried. He could no longer arrest and torture Christians, and soon he found himself thrown in prison with them.

(Richard Wurmbrand, qu. in *Renewal* 43 (1973)).

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