

HOMILY FOR SUNDAY 1ST NOVEMBER 2020

Dear Friends,

Church people sometimes become concerned about our contemporary Halloween and suggest that children dressing up as witches and playing pranks are dabbling dangerously with the occult. I imagine that most people see it as harmless fun and do not take it that seriously, but the day does have its sinister side.

Halloween is short for All Hallows' Even[ing], the night before All Hallows' or All Saints' Day, when it was believed demons and warlocks roamed abroad, enjoying a final fling before being decisively vanquished by the triumph of the Saints. Together with All Souls on 2nd November the three days make up Allhallowstide, the commemoration of God's saints and all the faithful departed that ushers in the month of remembrance, November.

Churches have occasionally tried to counteract the malign influence of Halloween by holding All Saints parties where children are encouraged to dress as a favourite saint and put on a pageant of sainthood. I don't think these have ever had much success in diverting attention from the attractions of our now commercialised Halloween - which does raise an interesting question. Why are human beings so engrossed by darkness and evil, catastrophes, things going wrong, and not nearly so much by goodness, light and truth? News in news bulletins nearly always means bad news: good news is held not to be newsworthy.

We have to acknowledge of course that our lives do not run smoothly all the time. We suffer illnesses and accidents, bereavement, rejection in love, loss of employment, and the world has plenty of natural disasters in store for us, often quite unpredictable - who would ever have thought at the beginning of 2020 that so much of the year would be taken up with battling against the Coronavirus?

The stuff of human life is conflict of one kind or another, so it is natural that most of our reporting of human affairs should be taken up with the reporting of conflict. This is the case with newspapers and TV, with novels and plays. I have just been reading a novel in which the heroine is trying to establish her identity in the social world and having to contend with other people and situations in order to do so. On the final page she is able to marry the man of her dreams - and that is where the story ends. There could I suppose be a sequel about her married life, but the author clearly intends that once she is married and enters a life of happiness and wedded bliss there is nothing any more to write about. I even heard a novelist of today once say that her stories were written out of her personal unhappiness and once she had married she had no desire to write stories: life was too fulfilling to be bothered about fiction.

As in life generally so it is in our spiritual life. It is not easy to sustain a life of faith and prayer, because we must admit that the journey of faith is often mysterious and uncertain. We are not quite sure where God is and how he is working. Alongside the problems and difficulties that life

puts in our way we have our times of doubt and hesitation: a Spanish writer even said that a faith that has no doubts is a dead faith.

This is why to keep us going it is so vital to have a goal in mind, a destination infinitely desirable which we are striving towards but which for the time being remains tantalisingly beyond our grasp. This is what we call heaven or the kingdom of God. The importance of the saints for us is that they are a great source of inspiration on the journey. They are the ones who have already worked through all the hardships and pains of life here and now - in looking up details of saints' lives I often seem to have come across the phrase, 'He died worn out by his labours'! And having come through we believe that they have already been received by God into his kingdom.

So we can hope and believe that once we have worked through our lives in this world we too will come to the heavenly mansions, the place Jesus says he has prepared for us at the heart of God's love. And then our story will be at an end here and now: in another way it will only just be beginning.

By tradition the Gospel reading for All Saints' Day is the Beatitudes, where Jesus pronounces as blessed those who strive for God's kingdom: blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and so on. The first beatitude, Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God, is perhaps the key to them all. To be poor in spirit is to know one's utter dependence on God, to know that in him is our all and from him we receive all. We cannot know the kingdom fully in this life - 'now we see through a glass darkly' - but we get glimpses of it, and we can practise being poor in spirit by letting go of our own thoughts and desires and letting God be God in us and for us. The more we can in this way simply rest in God the better prepared we shall be for the enjoyment of his kingdom. The second reading at Mass on this day, from the 1st Letter of St. John, puts it like this:

*My dear people, we are already the children of God,
but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed;
all we know is that when it is revealed
we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is.*

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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