

No doubt like me you have noticed the aisles in our supermarkets being given over to Halloween costumes and the like. Indeed, the city of Boroondara has seen fit to enhance the celebration by placing appropriate cut-outs along our main streets and elsewhere of ghosts and witches and the like. Even the local streets have fake cobwebs festooned across front fences and street trees. All very friendly and jolly. But is that all there is?

Halloween is a "holiday" celebrated by many Christians. The events of Halloween begin as day turns to night and the spirit of darkness descends. It is a time in which groups of children, teenagers, and adults dress in costumes and run from door-to-door shouting "trick-or-treat". Although some dress in costumes with a friendly appearance, the event is designed to convey the horror effect. Therefore, children, and even some adults, disguise themselves as witches, goblins, skeletons, and even the devil himself. Many often chalk this up as a time to have harmless fun. But what is the true meaning of Halloween and is there any reason for Christians not to celebrate it, let alone condone it?

The origin of Halloween traces back to the ancient religion of the Celts in Ireland thousands of years ago. The spiritual world was very important to the Celts; so much so that they had approximately 300 idol gods that they worshipped for various reasons. The Celts would have a feast called Samhain (pronounced Sah-ween) on November 1st in honour of "lord of the dead". They viewed the times of the year in two halves - "light" for summer and "dark" for winter. This event was held to mark the end of the "light" summer months and the beginning of the "dark" days of winter. They believed this was a time when a barrier between natural and supernatural forces was temporarily removed and ghosts and spirits could wander freely among humans. They believed these spirits would sometimes bring violence. The Celtic priests, called Druids, would carry out sacrificial rituals to pacify the "lord of the dead". These sacrifices would involve burning crops, animals, and even humans in a bonfire. The term "bonfire" is derived from "bone fire", literally meaning fires with bones of humans and animals. They believed their bonfires would make the "lord of the dead" protect them from the evil spirits and ensure the sun would return after the long cold winter.

When the Romans invaded Britain, Roman festivals began to merge with Celtic practices. One of the Roman celebrations was called Feralia, a holiday designed to give rest and peace to the departed. Sacrifices and prayers were offered on behalf of the deceased during this event.

It was Pope Boniface IV in the seventh Century who introduced All Saint's Day to honour saints and martyrs. It was created partly with the hope of replacing the pagan festival of the dead. It was originally observed on May 13th but since the church could not stop the pagan worship, it was thought merging it with the pagan holiday would suppress it. Therefore, in 834 Pope Gregory III changed the All Saint's Day celebration from May 13th to November 1st. Since to be "hallowed" means sacred or holy, and since this was a holy celebration, October 31st became known as All Hallows' Eve. Even though this celebration was intended to replace the Samhain pagan festival, many of their customs survived and when merged with All Hallows' Eve, Halloween was born.

Looking at Halloween today, we find that none of the Christian rituals survived except for the "hallow" in Halloween.

The celebration of Halloween found its way to America in the 1800s when millions of Irish immigrants went there searching for relief from a famine and brought their customs with them. In their native land, the Irish would carve out turnips or beets as lanterns to represent the dead. Due to a shortage of turnips and beets in America, the immigrants turned to the abundant pumpkin crop to make their lanterns. Pumpkins were carved with demonic faces and a light placed inside to scare off what they believed were wandering spirits of the dead.

As I suggested earlier, "trick-or-treat" is the signature line given by Halloween revellers as they run from house to house. This ritual also traces back to the pagan Samhain festival of the Celts. The Celts believed spirits of the dead would rise out of the grave and wander the earth during Samhain. They believed some of the dead would return to their old residences. So, they would place plates of food at their doorways along with gifts hoping they would soothe the wandering spirits. They feared the ghosts would harm their livestock or property if not pacified with a treat.

Another way the villagers believed they could protect themselves from the dead was through trickery. Some would wear masks while others put soot on their faces hoping the ghosts would view them as just another spirit of the dead rather than a human. They thought that this trickery would cause the evil spirits to pass them by. This began the present-day Halloween practice of disguising oneself as a demonic creature or the like. The villagers looked to find protection either by tricking or treating the spirits of the dead.

So where does that leave us in the 21st Century in Australia on the eve of All Saints Day 2021. Stranded as it were between the wholly secular festivities of Halloween, in its Australian version, and the venerable Feast of All Saints. Do we simply remain stranded, or do we need to take a stand? Perhaps even more importantly, if we do take a stand, will anyone notice?

I for one, remain somewhat bemused. Some years ago, I decided to take a stand and when the knock came on the door I would answer it not with sweets, but with a bowl of fruit. The varied responses were not unexpected. The dentists of Australia would have thanked me, I think.

Jesus said on one memorable occasion:

Whoever is not against us is for us (Mark 9.40)

So, is this one of those occasions? Do we simply join in Halloween, however politely, and let it pass or is there something more fundamental at stake?

We certainly live in a society that is today unquestionably pluralistic, in that the variety of world views and religions represented in Australia today makes the 1950s and 60's that I grew up in seem extraordinarily monochrome.

The feast of All Saints reminds us in the words of St Paul in the opening of his letter to the Church at Rome that:

We are (all) called to be saints (Romans 1.7)

So, what exactly did Paul have in mind? For many of us the image of Saints is the sort of image you see in icons, plaster statues or in stained glass windows around us. Stiff, formal, generally male, bearded and uniformly white.

But what is quite clear is what St Paul has in mind. Its not a case of we are (already), saints not that we should be saints, not that it would be good if we were, but simply and, far more profoundly, we are called to be saints.

In fact, the term "saint" must have been Paul's favourite word for describing Christians because he used it about 60 times in his letters, which is especially surprising when you realize that he never once called them Christians. And yet "saint" is not a word we use much in the church today.

Yet in the Apostles Creed which forms part of the Baptism service we all say

We believe in the Communion of Saints.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has this to say about this element of that faith statement:

The community of the saints is not an "ideal" community consisting of perfect and sinless men and women, where there is no need of further repentance. No, it is a community which proves that it is worthy of the gospel of forgiveness by constantly and sincerely proclaiming God's forgiveness...

So, we are called to be saints but mindful that we are also sinners, albeit forgiven and redeemed.

And tonight? Do we lie in apples, bananas and the like or do we still offer what the Americans so delightfully called "candy"? Or we provide a short history lesson on Halloween with a layer of theology and hope there are no rotten eggs hidden among the lollies, soon to be thrown at our front door, for being so ungenerous,