

## **Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021 (Hallowe'en) – John 3:16-21 'Come into the light!'**

Today is something of a double whammy for many of us. To start with, it's the day the clocks go back and what we call British Summer Time officially ends. And that means, from today, it's dark by soon after 5pm and we enter that period when people working regular working hours hardly see any daylight during the week when they're not at work. Very few of us like this change, and some of us find it actually affects our mood significantly – we suffer from what is known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, known by the grimly appropriate acronym S-A-D.

This year it also happens that SAD day is also Hallowe'en, which again is something many of us do not look forward to. Some of you dread seeing people everywhere dressed up in scary costumes, or having neighbours trick-or-treating. Others of you enjoy it, but secretly wonder if you should, and so feel conflicted.

So today let's tackle this head-on: we'll start with a potted history of Hallowe'en, and how we got here – and then we'll share some inspiration from Jesus' words in John, which speak into what we might be feeling today.

**Hallowe'en is short for All Hallows Eve – or Holy Evening.** The following day – 1<sup>st</sup> November – is All Hallows Day, the day in the church's year when we celebrate all the saints i.e. the holy or hallowed people, Christians. Nowadays we call it All Saints Day, but in some ways what this has done is separate this day from the eve that went before it, so Hallowe'en has become its own thing. We'll come back to that later.

But if we celebrate all the saints tomorrow, why *do* we have Hallowe'en today, with lots of dark things like ghosts and goblins, and so on? The answer goes way back to the spread of the Christian faith across Europe. As you may know, one of the ways the church tried to transform the cultures around it was to Christianise the pagan festivals of the local populations. So Easter did that around the spring solstice (the word Lent originally meant spring), and Christmas adapted the traditional midwinter solstice gift-giving festival, focusing it on God's supreme gift to us of Jesus – even though Jesus was most likely born in September!

**All Hallows Day did something similar with the moment when summer turned to winter.** This again was the moment of an important pagan festival called Samhain (sah-win). In pagan religion, this was the day of year when the worlds of the living and the dead overlapped, as summer turned into winter: people believed that spirits roamed the world on this night and could be appeased by giving them gifts of food, otherwise they might curse your crops. So people left food out to appease these roaming spirits, and in Europe they lit fires to ward them off.

The Church tried to redeem this festival by redirecting people's attention to the souls of the departed faithful, but with only partial success. The old traditions never died out, but evolved so that instead of actual spirits, people would dress up in scary costumes, pretending to be these evil spirits. This is where trick or treating comes from: in essence – and 99% of people who do this have no idea this is where it comes from – when you trick or treat, you are pretending to be an evil spirit who needs a gift to be placated: if you receive a treat the household's crop is spared but if they refuse, your trick is the modern day equivalent of the old curse that people feared on their crops.

Carved pumpkins also have same association – their ugly faces represent spirits or goblins – and were often placed outside houses to ward off other spirits that might come and curse them.

It's pretty dark stuff, isn't it? It's worth saying that the Church tried again to make it Christian in the Middle Ages by offering an alternative idea. Poor people were encouraged to go round houses on All Hallows Eve offering to pray for the souls of the dead in return for food – in other words trying to redeem the idea into a blessing instead of a curse – they called it 'souling'. But that tradition was lost, especially after the Reformation, as Protestant churches no longer believed in the efficacy of praying for the dead, as their souls were *already* received by Jesus.

Fast-forward a few centuries and factor in the immense amount of money to be made from Hallowe'en traditions – \$6 billion is spent each year in the US alone – and there's every reason for business and culture to keep the thing going, even though it no longer has any connection either to All Saints Day or to the original pagan festival. Nowadays it's marketed as a bit of harmless fun, and let's recognise that nearly everyone today treats it as harmless fun, even if its roots are very different.

**So what do we do with Hallowe'en? The first thing is not to worry about it.** Christ's power and authority covers us, just as St Paul reminds the Ephesian church: Jesus is 'seated at God's right hand in the heavenly realms, far above *all* rule and authority, [all] power and dominion, and *every* name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.' If Hallowe'en makes you nervous, pray for protection in the all-powerful name of Jesus. Nothing can withstand that.

Second, I suggest **we have two basic responses** – what you might call the low-energy and high-energy option. The low-energy option is just to ignore it. I would suggest that there's little point educating enthusiastic Hallowe'eners about its roots, but we can choose to pray *today* that its effect on the atmosphere in our area will be minimal, that Christ's love will cover every encounter, and perhaps even that some participants will feel an unease that opens their minds to something greater.

**The high-energy option is to transform it.** Even if the Church largely failed to do so all those centuries today, I think they were on the right lines trying to take something dark and turn it towards the light, trying to offer a positive alternative. Thousands of churches now offer light parties around Hallowe'en, and, whilst the pandemic makes that hard this year, we can share light in small ways. In Bristol, where our neighbourhood went in for Hallowe'en in a big way, Alise carved a 'Jesus' pumpkin and we welcomed trick or treaters and gave them sweets like everyone else, but said that we were celebrating the light that night. I think we might have given out glow sticks as well, as a reminder of light, though maybe that was another year!

Let's finish by going back to our Scripture for today. Let's never forget that Jesus' beautiful promise to us is that he comes to bring us life, and this life is about dwelling in the eternal light of God's presence. **When we come to Jesus we come into the light**, and what a precious promise that is especially during the dark winter months – a light that never fades or dies out.

It is a polarising message: Jesus is also equally honest that some people will choose darkness, or try and hide from the light, and Hallowe'en does remind us of this conflict between light and darkness. But it's not a fair fight. **Light always defeats darkness**. Darkness only exists where there is no light. Today, let's claim the light of Christ for ourselves, let's pray the light of Christ into our communities, and let's share the light of Christ wherever we can, that people would know that 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will enjoy everlasting life.' Amen.