

All Saints 2021

Each year, I begin the homily on All Saints Day with a little history.

Admittedly, my motivation is, in part, my desire to reclaim Halloween as a sacred day.

The celebration has been much maligned in my lifetime.

People have taken the scaring too far.

This year, for example, we were told that our children might be drugged with edible marijuana.

When I was a child, a story about razor blades in apples frightened the nation.

Though it turned out that the story was untrue, the damage was done.

It and many other false stories like it spread distrust and fear.

Ironically, as a cultural practice, Halloween was supposed to help us to make our fears meaningful, to put them into a spiritual context so that we could overcome them and grow.

For the Celtic pagans, to whom the tradition traces its routes, it offered people a way of managing their fear about evil spirits and ills in general.

Such activities as dressing in costume to fool the spirits and offering soul cakes to the poor helped them to pass through the dark night to the light of the new year.

These practices taught that we can overcome our fears with creativity and kindness.

It is not surprising, however, that some people try to undermine this work and reestablish our fears, because it gives them power over us.

The more afraid we are, the more malleable we are.

Politicians do this frequently.

They do it because it works, and it works because we allow ourselves to be thus manipulated.

Halloween as we remember it helped teach children to face their fears in order to get a reward, which, in turn, taught them that facing their fears in general was a laudable and meaningful act.

It reminds us that nothing truly significant comes without challenge.

Those who seek to frighten us with tales of razor blades and “edibles,” on the other hand, want to train us not to face our fears, not to reach out, not to rely upon one another’s kindness.

We instead are to dwell in apprehension and suspicion.

A little history and learning helps to dispel the myths of murderous neighbors used to keep us weak, isolated, divided so that we cannot resist those who have power over us.

People like to point out that, in order to co-opt pagan celebrations, the church intentionally placed important feasts on pagan holidays, and that is true, but to stop there is to rest in cynicism, which is not a Christian virtue.

The gospel encourages us to move from cynicism, a kind of death, to hope, life, resurrection.

For the Celts, these points of celestial transition marked the thin times, when the separation between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane is less clear.

For us, also, the transitions of birth, death, and resurrection are reflected in the natural cycle in a way that is both uncanny and beautiful.

The organizing of the Christian calendar according to the natural cycle indicates the sacredness of time for us just as much as it did for the pagans.

That is, it serves to remind us that nothing here is meaningless, that all of existence is purposeful, that God is in all that exists.

All Saints Day sits in the middle of three consecutive holy days, the much maligned Halloween (also called All Hallow's Eve), All Saints Day, and All Souls Day (also called the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed).

Together, the three holy days form Allhallowtide, which falls close to the autumnal equinox.

These three days counterbalance the triduum of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil, which falls close to the spring equinox.

Similarly, the Feast of the Nativity, or Christmas is close to the winter solstice, and the Feast of John the Baptist is close to the summer solstice.

John's birth, in other words, is celebrated just as the days begin to shorten; Christ's birth is celebrated just as they begin to lengthen, thus John wains as Christ waxes.

(Much thought went into the Christian calendar.)

Now, at the beginning of the darker part of the year, it is natural that we think of death and celebrate Allhallowtide, whereas at the beginning of the lighter part of year, we think of resurrection and celebrate Easter (with apologies to the southern hemisphere, of course).

Part of the feeling of uplift at the various holidays derives from the unconscious connection formed between these celebrations that we observe and the cycle of nature.

If you do not believe me, imagine having Christmas during the long days of summer, as in Australia, or Allhallowtide's focus on death in spring when daffodils are blooming.

The cycle helps us to experience that we are meaningfully connected to the world around us, to *feel* and not just to know that we are not merely random bits of carbon that happened to develop self-awareness.

We see that we are part of something larger, and that our own struggles are meaningful.

We are able to engage vigorously in those struggles because we sense that they have purpose, that they and we are part of something bigger and that the nature of that bigger purpose is love.

Without this framework of understanding, our challenges seem meaningless, something to be avoided rather than engaged.

We seek safety at all costs and become stunted and shallow.

We mistake “nice” for caring, admiration for self-worth.

The Christian framework and its practices lead us forward, but too often, we get the cart before the horse.

Today, in the collect, for example, we prayed, “Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living.”

We think that, if we succeed in a saintly life, *then* God will love us.

The reverse is true.

God’s love for us encourages us towards success in our growth.

Without a knowledge of God's love and concrete experiences of love from others, we remain afraid, unable to face our fears, to approach the door in the scary house trusting that one will receive grace.

We are unable to grow.

That is why our message and our relationships here are so important.

We are reminded of God's love; we experience the love of others around us.

From there, we are encouraged to face what we must face.

Challenges, though difficult, are not destructive.

We learn through these experiences that on the other side of our challenges lies even greater meaning and depth, that death is not the end.

After the darkness of Halloween comes the light and hope of All Saints, and that hope leads us forward to Easter resurrection.

The days may get shorter, the light may dim, but the light will return.

In the meantime, we offer one another grace.

Happy All Saints.