

All Saints

31 10 10

Almighty God,
you have knit together your elect
in one communion and fellowship
in the mystical body of your Son, Christ our Lord;
grant us grace so to follow your blessed saints
in all virtuous and godly living
that we may come to those inexpressible joys
that you have prepared for those who truly love you.

My text may be found in Psalm 149 and verse 4:

‘The Lord takes pleasure in his people.’

It's good to go away on holiday but it's good too to be back in Dinard. I've spent a fortnight in Potters Bar which sandwiched a quick trip to Venice with my friend, Father Richard, from St Barnabas, Colchester. I've had chance to catch up with my friends from Dame Alice Owen and last Sunday, I took the services at St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, the parish church where my home is in Potters Bar and where I was an assistant priest before coming here to St Bartholomew's.

Oddly, St Mary's has two patronal festivals: they celebrate the 8th September, the birthday of Mary the mother of Jesus, the Son of God, and 1st November, they celebrate All Saints' Day. Like the majority of the Church of England, here we

transfer All Saints to the nearest Sunday to the 1st November and so this year we are marking All Saints Day today on 31st October, Hallowe'en.

And Hallowe'en, with its connotation of witches and witchcraft, the dark supernatural world of ghosts and spirits, is the key to my sermon today. The word Hallowe'en has a feel of the pagan about it because of its association with the 31st October but 'hallow' is simply the old fashioned word for saint and 'e'en' is merely the abbreviation for eve or evening before, so Hallowe'en means the eve or day before All Saints' Day.

So why the connection between a perfectly respectable Christian festival when we remember the heroes of the faith who are potential role models of the spiritual life and something pagan? The answer is simple and highlights a Christian technique of overlay. When the land was converted to Christianity, sites sacred to earlier beliefs were often built on. Churches were planted on places where pagan deities had once been worshipped which neatly prevented them being used for their former purpose. The same principle is true of the timings of our great Christian festivals. Christmas, the birth of Christ, has been timed to coincide with the Roman mid-winter festival of Saturnalia or the Norse Yuletide feast. Easter, determined by the full moon and Passover, neatly replaces a Spring Festival. The birth of John the Baptist hits midsummer on 24th June. And All Saints and All Souls cover the Celtic New Year festival of Samain. The festival marks the start of a new year and it is on the principle of a new year, a new beginning, that I want to focus this All Saints Day in the year of our Lord, 2010.

The idea of a fresh start is not new but the principle of a new beginning, a fresh start, is particularly Christian in character. There are three underlying assumptions. The first is contained in my text from Psalm 149: 'The Lord takes pleasure in his people.' This embodies the idea that God loves us and wants us to have a full and loving relationship with him. The second assumption is that sin, our wrong-doing, separates us from the love of God. The third is that our sins can be and are forgiven by God our Father when we recognise what we have done wrong, regret what we have done wrong and determine we will do better in the future. The cancelling of our debt, the washing away of our burden of impurity, is one of the most attractive and healthy features of our Christian faith.

We don't have to wait for a new year for a new beginning. Every morning when we wake up has the potential for a new start: a chance to be right with God. But the great thing about a new year is that it encourages us once again to think about a new start. There are many beginnings to the year. The UK financial year begins in April; the academic year begins in September; the calendar new year begins on January 1st; and All Saints marks the beginning of the Celtic New Year.

So as we move into winter and the days grow colder and shorter, let us reflect on the possibility of a new beginning. Let us reflect on the wonderful fact that we are all potential saints and that in one sense of the word we are indeed all saints. Let us reflect that God loves us for as the Psalmist says, 'The Lord takes pleasure in his people.' Let us reflect that there is always the possibility of a new start for us all and that we have the chance truly to be the sort of people that God has always intended us to be.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

31st October, 2010

H: Sermon 22: All Saints

