

Sermon

2021-10-31 All Saints Day And All Souls

Revelation 21:1-6a & John 11:32-44

Church and civil calendars can throw up some odd anomalies. So today, while most of the country is celebrating Halloween – that is the Eve of All Hallows - here we are in church celebrating All Hallows itself - that is All Saints Day, one day early.

One of the side effects of modern secularism is that we are no longer so afraid of witches and goblins that we cower in our houses at Halloween, praying for deliverance from the Devil and all his cronies. I think the only real benefit of secularism that I can warmly welcome. Instead Halloween can be safely enjoyed by our children, with only the faintest frisson of nervous excitement.

This makes the clash of dates less problematic – though I still regret a bit the loss of the contrast between Halloween, when all the supernatural baddies enjoy a field day, and the feast of All Saints where they are firmly clamped down on and banished from the world again.

The day after All Saints Day is All Souls Day, also known as the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. That would be an appropriate time to remember our own departed loved ones, if we did not postpone that to Remembrance Sunday these days.

So what is the difference between Saints and Souls that they need to have separate days? Definitions vary, but Saints are generally said to be people who have been formally recognised for their exceptional holiness and closeness to God.

But there must be an awful lot of people that have not been formally recognised, but were equally holy, equally exceptional. And the unremarkable people? When St Paul was writing his letters, he spoke about “the Saints” meaning the whole congregation. And not all of them can have been exceptional – often entire households were baptised together, presumably including all the small children.

So to me there is no real distinction between the Saints and the Souls of the Faithful Departed, or at most a matter of degree. But it is useful to have the two separate days. It gives us the space to thank God for ordinarily good and faithful people, as well as those very specially recognised people, who provide us with inspiration and the example to help us along our own way of faith.

And what of the good, kind, public spirited and helpful people who have not yet managed to come to faith, for one reason or another, by the time they die? Or

indeed anyone else who we fear may not have been in a state of grace when they died? It would be presumptuous of us to think that the Love of God is not active among them, just as it is among us. And we clearly believe that God is a loving Father to us all, and that He sent His son into the world to save sinners – not just the God fearing, commandment obeying, righteous people, but all the crowds of sinners. And Jesus confirmed this with His approach towards overbearing Roman occupiers, heretic Samaritans, those possessed by devils, and lepers whose disgusting disfigurement must surely have been brought on them by their own sin. These days, happily most people have a more enlightened approach to people of other denominations or faiths (like the Samaritans), people with mental illnesses (who may well have been thought of as being possessed by devils) and people with disfiguring illnesses or disablements. And maybe we should think carefully about our feelings towards the Roman occupiers, given some of the things that happened in our own colonial past – but Jesus loved them all, and included them, both in His Ministry and as beneficiaries of His miracles. And everyone else, for that matter.

We may all have our own ideas about what Heaven is like, and who we will meet there, but it certainly won't be an exclusive place.

I have embarked on the course that you have to undergo in Southwark Diocese in order to be allowed to conduct funerals. One of the questions that bereaved people sometimes ask the person who will conduct the funeral is “where is my loved one now?” And we were given a standard form of words which pretty much covers all situations – that is “We don't know exactly where they are, except that they are in our hearts, and in the loving hands of God”.

May we remember this, for our own comfort, and for the encouragement of those we meet.

In the name of the Father...