

Assembly 3 November 2008

Saints and saintly lives

It has been a very busy few days in Christian Churches. Christians in all countries have been celebrating two special events. On Saturday the 1st November it was All Saints Day. Yesterday it was All Soul's Day.

We have heard a great deal in the media about Halloween and some of you might have been to one of many Halloween parties held across Hong Kong last Friday evening. Unfortunately, most people will not have heard about the two important dates in the Christian calendar at the beginning of November.

While the links between the events over the weekend might appear confusing, there is a very logical sequence as we move toward the advent of the Christmas season.

As you might already understand, the word Halloween is a composite of three words: All Hallows' Even. If these three words are run together the new word Halloween emerges. Let us look at those three words more carefully. The word All is obvious but what about the word Hallows? This is not a word often used in daily conversation in the English language and most people would not know what it means. We are helped a little by Harry Potter. J.K. Rowling decided that the name of her 7th and final book in the wonderfully exciting Harry Potter series would be *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. The word Hallow means 'to make holy or sacred'. But what about the word Even, the third word in Halloween? It too is a condensed word being the first four letters of the word Evening.

So All Hallows' Even, or Halloween, refers to the evening before All Hallows Day which we now call All Saints' Day. As I have said, while many people went to Halloween parties and parades on Friday evening, very few would have realised that this was the evening before a far more important event: All Saints' Day.

All Saints Day is a Christian day of observation. It was originally called as a day to celebrate the saints and martyrs who are in heaven. It is a holy day; a 'hallows' day. On this day, Christians remember and give thanks to those who have served their fellow man in a loving and caring way. Over the past two thousand years, the Church has honoured such people by giving them the title Saint. Some of the saints were put to death for believing in Christianity. Others who were not saints were also killed for their faith. They are called martyrs. There are many hundreds of official Saints and many millions of martyrs, known and unknown.

In the early years of the Christian church, a saint was given their own day in the yearly calendar: St. Paul's Day, for example, is the 25th January; St. Peter's Day is the 29th June, and so forth. Although we continue to remember particular saints on particular days, it is easier to remember all the saints on All Saints' Day, the 1st November.

This morning we sang *For All the Saints*. This was the favourite hymn of Bishop Hoare and its words will be very familiar to many people in this assembly. There are in fact eleven wonderful verses to this hymn that begins:

For all the saints, who from their labours rest,
who thee by faith before the world confessed,
thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

The second last verse, however, is the most powerful:

But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of glory passes on His way.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

All Saints Day is followed by All Souls Day and is the time when we remember those who have died. Many Christians will have left the names of loved ones who have passed away with the priest in their local church, so that they will receive prayers and blessings on this day.

Yes, it has been a very busy weekend: All Hallows' Even, All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Yet very few people in Hong Kong know more than Halloween. Last month an Anglican bishop in England published a book written specifically to help churches and schools arrange events for children and young people that focus on the positive messages of All Saints Day. He even wrote to the owners of England's largest chain of supermarkets, suggesting that the shops offer a range of alternative products such as bright balloons, hair braids and colourful costumes. The Bishop shares the view of many Christians that shop owners are increasingly keen to commercialise Halloween celebrations in a way that puts pressure on parents to purchase goods that promote the dark, negative side of Halloween.

Yet when I went into Wellcome and ParknShop last week, all I saw were shelves of ghost costumes, witches hats, devil's horns and so forth. There was also great publicity on television and in the newspapers this weekend about a Kindergarten in Hong Kong that decided to cancel its Halloween party this year. Unfortunately, the message from teachers was not listened to by the media: that the costumes and accessories had become too gory and blood thirsty for children of only four or five years of age. I hope you would agree that replica axes, fake blood and toy chainsaws are a long way removed from witches hats and pumpkin lanterns.

So how can we approach this time of year in a more positive way? At the morning service at St. John's Cathedral yesterday were banners drawn by children in the Sunday school. The banners depicted various Saints well known to Christians around the world: St. Francis who cared for animals, or Saint Nicholas who gave money to the poor and whose name would be used in the myth of Santa Claus.

But what would you wear if you decided to attend an All Saints party rather than a Halloween party? Would you arrive wearing a white robe, or maybe an angel's costume complete with wings? What does a modern day saint actually look like? The answer is you would come dressed as an ordinary person. Maybe you could be Mother Theresa who spent her life helping the poor in the slums of Calcutta; or the Reverend Martin Luther King who was instrumental in bringing civil rights to America's black population; or maybe one of the hundreds of doctors and nurses who rushed to Sichuan Province after the earthquake. All are saints in the eyes of our Lord.

All Saints' Day is a joyous occasion. It is also a time to think about we might need to do in order to follow the example of the all the saints whom have gone before.

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