

All Saints and All Souls 2023

Rev. Bill Church

(Readings: Hebrews 11. 32-34, 39-40 & 12.1-2 & Mark 16.19-20)

You don't need me to remind you that the days are growing shorter and darker; and you don't need me to remind you that last week there were a lot of Hallowe'en events.

This is not a coincidence. Hallowe'en began among our pagan forebears in these islands, survived, travelled to North America and has returned enthusiastically.

Whatever it is now, it originated from a real fear of darkness and of the dead - not the ersatz horror of children's masks or the make-believe fright of a ghoulish pumpkin, but a real and deep-seated fear that the dead were hostile, could cause you harm and that evil lurked in the unlit spaces.

The Christian view has always been different. The closing words of the Benedictus are telling us that Christ came "to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

The festivals of All Saints and All Souls remind us that the church is, perhaps uniquely, a community of the living and the dead.

The hymn "Ye holy angels bright" lists the whole panoply of heaven -

The angels, God's celestial creation,

The blessed souls at rest, who have ended their earthly stay,
and

The saints who toil below - that is, us.

These festivals remind us the dead are not just forerunners and predecessors but fellow members with us of the church of God.

They are an inspiration and an encouragement, and, as the Letter to the Hebrews suggests, watching us as witnesses and urging us on from the sidelines.

The festivals also remind us that there are "big S" saints and "little s" saints.

The "big S" saints are those with saints' days allotted to them and churches named after them, Saints like Andrew, Mary and Alban about whom we can tell stories; "little s" saints are those known or unknown, remembered or not remembered, who ran the good race.

And "little s" saints also include those who are now still running the race. Cromwell's army in the English Civil War sometimes referred to themselves as "the saints". They were right in principle. Those who seek to find and follow God's way can rightly be called saints; but they were wrong in practice when they concluded that those who did not think as they did must therefore be sinners and not worthy of God's grace.

Matthew's Beatitudes confer blessedness on the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart etc and offers them their rewards, not least a place in the kingdom of heaven, a chance to be "little s" saints.

Those who have lived and died are not fearsome threats lurking in the darkness - they are our pathfinders to the promised land.