

Bedmond, All Saints 2018

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Of course, like so many Christian Festivals, it all began long before Christianity had even dawned. The Celts – we tend to call them the 'ancient Celts', but, of course, they weren't ancient at the time! – used to believe that as Autumn gave way to Winter, the boundary between the spirit world of the dead and this earthly world would be at its thinnest; so if departed spirits had any inclination to interact with us this would be the time of year we would be most likely to become aware of them. Since their calendar year ended then, the last day of October was obviously a sensible time to do things which symbolized keeping harmful spirits at bay by lighting fires or lanterns during the darkness of night. It was also a good time to kill any animals you might plan to eat during the winter and, perhaps, enjoy some of the meat and other food and drink in a festival way to cheer yourselves up as the cold and darkness of winter drew near. They called their festival Samhain, pronounced Saw'inn. Our version of it, on that same night of Oct 31, is Halloween. It's easy to see how all of that forms the basis for what has now become the almost entirely secular, very enjoyable and now very expensive Halloween evening.

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Part of the background to all that was a growing awareness that we, as Christians, are part of a much bigger fellowship than that we experience here on earth, the vast company of all those who have preceded us and died. That gradually came to be seen as not only those whose Christian lives had been 'special', but every Christian, however ordinary or relatively undistinguished their lives may have been. (Some of you may remember that just five years ago I, like many others before and since in many, many places, used a sermon here to remind us all that the word 'saint' in the New Testament is never used exclusively to mean the 'special' ones but all who are

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"The home of God is among mortals; he will dwell with them, they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Those are words for people to hear as they reflect on the lives of those who have been loved and lost; that assurance that far from being the end of life, death, which itself will come eventually to an end, is the entry into a life which is free from suffering and pain, mourning and tears. What more could we want for those who have died.

And then there's that even stronger reassurance in the story we heard of the raising of Lazarus. Well, part of which we heard! I suppose it was in the interests of people who can't listen to anything longer than a few minutes that the compilers of our Lectionary decided to start the story halfway through and, in doing so, cheat us of one of the most important aspects of the story! Perhaps they also imagined that most of the hearers would be so familiar with the story that they wouldn't need to hear the rest. Little did they realise how little time and effort many of today's Christian followers actually spend reading and getting familiar with their Bible, always assuming they actually have such a thing in their homes!

Lazarus was a close friend of Jesus and of his disciples. So when word reached them on their journeys that their friend had fallen desperately ill and that Jesus' healing hand was urgently needed they could hardly believe their ears when he so casually, as they saw it, said "No, don't worry, he'll be alright. We must carry on with our journey!" You can imagine how Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, felt when their brother died, knowing, as they saw it, that it need never have happened if Jesus had just stopped what he was doing and gone to his home to look after him. So when we, in our Lectionary reading, join the story half way through, Martha has already had a go at him for not being there and Mary repeats the process when he eventually goes towards her. "If only you had been here, my brother would never have died" are her first words to him. Of course, I may be wrong – she and her sister may have meant nothing more than an expression of their faith in him – but I rather think there was more to it.

The equivalent response for us is "Where is God when our loved ones die?" If he is the all-powerful one, why didn't he stop it happening? Haven't we all, at some time or other, thought and even said those same or very similar words? "Why? Why didn't you stop it?" And what I glean from that Lazarus story is that it's really ok to think or even say just that. The sisters get no reprimand from Jesus. In fact, he actually cries

with them. If you think it, say it. The God you want to take it out on has broader shoulders than we can ever imagine. The response we get is one of shared tears, not stern reprimand. Even better, the message from that story is one of Resurrection. It's the words from that story that ring in the ears of most mourners who attend a Christian Funeral service – "I am the Resurrection and the Life, says the Lord..." Halloween, All Saints, All Souls – their message is the same as far as the Christian Faith is concerned. Death is not the end of life; those whom we have loved and lost in this world have their own life in some other sphere; we ourselves will not come to an end when our physical life comes to a halt; somehow, in some way we can never fully grasp with our current minds Jesus has conquered death by his own resurrection. In the words of John Donne:-

Death, be not proud;

Though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, thou art not so,

For those who thou thinkest thou dost overthrow die not, poor Death;

Nor yet can thou kill me.

One short sleep past, we wake eternal and Death shall be no more;

Death, thou shalt die!

Brian Hibberd