**Sermon Stowe 4 before Advent 1 John 3: 1-3, Matt 5: 1-12**

Today I want to talk about the festival of All Saints which was actually Nov 1, last Wednesday. The celebration has a long history; it’s one of the oldest non-Scriptural festivals. So I want to briefly remind you of its history and then go on to talk about its significance for us today.

As the early church grew it was challenged by other religions, many of which were supported and enabled by powerful rulers who had a vested interest in them. Those hearing the Christian message and believing were invited to change their lives and live in accord with Jesus’ teaching- and they did. There was brutal opposition and many Christians lost their lives in very unpleasant ways – as they still do. The story of the sacrifices made by these martyrs was passed from one generation to another and Christians came to venerating the lives and deaths of the predeceased Christians whom they described as saints. The church leaders, early Popes, knew that people prayed to saints hoping they (saints) would expedite whatever they needed. Some went so far as to obtain body parts and other holy items believed them to have powers to persuade God that we might describe as magical. It’s said that fragments of the cross would have created a large forest. Some years ago Judith and I were on holiday went into a church in Dubrovnik which had a special chapel dedicated to the bones of saints. As a post Reformation Christian I thought it was revolting and the theology of those who prayed to saints just wrong. Jesus is the one and only to intercede for us with the Father. The Popes, recognising that the veneration of saints was a good thing thought that the church should formally honour and esteem the saints. They set aside a day for this celebration, the aim being to encourage the church to particularly remember those who had died in faith; to honour all Christians who had died whether they suffered bad deaths or good ones – whether they were well known or not. Hence the importance of the word All in the title for today. The first record about a formal celebration of ‘All Saints’ comes in the reign of Pope Boniface in C7 who decided that the date was the first Sunday after Pentecost – because it was clearly the work of the Holy Spirit who inspired those who gave their lives to the faith. Those of you still awake will immediately realise that this Sunday, Pentecost 1, is the Sunday we now call Trinity Sunday. We reach a moment of pragmatic calendar manipulation. In C8 Pope Gregory decided that the church should compete more effectively with the pagan world, particularly the Celts at the end of October, beginning of November had a great festival to celebrate harvest and enjoy themselves before Winter came. Rather like Christmas was dropped on top of a pagan midwinter festival in December All Saints was relocated to November 1st, where it has rested.

Like most significant Christian celebrations especially Christmas and Easter, All Saints has suffered from the corrupting work of secular society. Halloween has a decent historical origin. It was the custom of poor people on the evening before All Saints Day, All hallowed Eve corrupted into Halloween to visit houses and offer to pray for those living there and to pray for those in their families who had died who were thought to be particularly close at this time. The reward was a gift.

In England, from the medieval period, up until the 1930s people practiced the Christian custom of souling on Halloween, which involved groups of soulers, both Protestant and Catholic going round begging the rich for soul cakes, in exchange for [praying](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_prayer) for the souls of the givers and their deceased family and friends. A soul cake was rather like a hot cross bun. It appears that this practise was gradually changed by Scottish immigrants in Canada and then in USA so the souling was preceded by some coercion being shown. So the practise of remembering the dead was secularised. The habit of dressing up and disguising was done so that the returning spirit could not recognise you morphed into witches costumes and pumpkins with grotesque designs and candles to illuminate them. I think that these secular celebrations are disrespectful of those who are reminded of the death of someone dear to them. We all know the pain and hurt that the death of someone close and dear to us causes and the trivialisation for commercial ends is, I think wrong and close on being immoral.

Enough of the history, though it’s useful to know where these customs come from.

Let’s think about what we mean when we talk about All Saints. Who is a saint? Are we talking about the notable Christians who have played a significant role in building and supporting the church at some time in the past? 2 weeks ago I took a service and talked about Luke the Apostle and he certainly falls into this category. In our Lectionary there are hundreds of major and minor saints whose lives we remember; more than 1 per day. But this festival is called All Saints and invites us to remember and celebrate those we know about (Saints with a capital S) and also to remember those who led quiet unremarkable lives that are not recorded in the Lectionary or elsewhere but served and supported the church; people like us. But should our celebration be limited to those who have died? St Paul in the first verse of his letter to the church in Ephesus obviously includes all the saints there both alive and dead. It begins “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, ‘To all the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.’” If Paul is right, and I think he is, we should consider ourselves firmly linked to Christians down through the ages who have been faithful followers of Jesus. And we should make ourselves aware of and inspired by the work that those saints we know about did for the church and much more significantly for the God we worship. These women and men are our sisters and brothers and the example they give us should motivate and enable us to live as Christians in our time and situation. Like them we are called to serve God by serving each other.

I have not mentioned our Epistle or Gospel readings. John, epistle writer reminds us , “*Dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known*.” We are called to recognise that we are all work in progress and our final destination, near or far, is hidden in the future. The Gospel reading is the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In it Jesus identifies the detailed parts of our work in progress which is the way we should be in relationship with each other and with God.

I was in Southwell Cathedral on Sunday as part of a choir and the last hymn of their communion service rang bells for me by making a practical link between All Saints and our Christian life here in Stowe. You know it well but it’s a brilliant summary of how we should be living among others and growing closer to Jesus.

*Brother, sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;*

*Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey and companions on the way, we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.*

*I will hold the Christ light for you in the night-time of your fear, I will hold my hand out to you; speak the peace you long to hear.*

*I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh I’ll laugh with you. I will share your joy and sorrow till we’ve seen this journey through.*

*When we sing to God in heaven we shall find such harmony, Born of all we’ve known together of Christ’s love and agony.*

*Brother, sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

AMEN