

Running the Race Together – Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 31 October 2021

Today is All Hallows Eve and is the start of three days of Halloween.

All Hallows Eve. (Hallow is another word for saints)

All Saints Day

All Souls Day.

The observance of these festivals goes back a very long way indeed and there is debate as to whether the origin is Pagan; that is, indigenous spirituality, or Christian... it's most likely, Christianized pagan worship to be fair.

At the very end of harvest, at the beginning of the dark months of winter a festival was held to honour the souls of those departed this life. Myth and spirituality combine to create the idea that the souls of the departed come to visit the living and gifts of food and wine were left out for their benefit. People baked soul bread to leave out.

All Hallows Eve developed into a festival event with people pretending to be the visiting spirits, dressing up and going from house to house and it being a party atmosphere.

The following day was a festival day to honour the saints and the day after the souls of all the departed.

Is it something we should take any notice of? Or be bothered about? Does it have any relevance?

The Author of Hebrews clearly thinks so. Our reading from Hebrews chapter 12 talks about a great cloud of witnesses (the saints departed this life) and in chapter 11 we have a roll-call. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses (and his parents) Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets.

In his commentary on Hebrews, Thomas Long suggests the author is creating a daisy chain of people, holding an unbroken cord of faith, some hands crossing on the line, others touching nearby and he's leaving space on the end of the line for you and I to step forward and hold on, linking ourselves with the saints who have gone before us.

At Morning Prayer during October the Northumbria Community were doing something similar, tracing the Christian story through people and places leading to today – it's the same Cord of faith starting in the New Testament with Jesus (whereas our Hebrews is refereeing characters from the Old Testament).

Jesus and John the beloved disciple with Mary who he took into his own home. Then on to Polycarp, then Irenaeus – then places where the faith blossomed leading to Ninian and Patrick (St. Patrick of Ireland), Brigid, and Columba on Iona, (and then my favourites) Aidan and Oswald and Hild at Whitby and Cuthbert and Boisil and on and on down to today's Northumbria Community.

We could do the same here. I'm holding the Cord of faith and there are saints who have gone before me whose faith and goodness have been told to me. Bill Ryder, and Anthony Tittle and Arthur Dove and Nancy who I did meet.

The author of Hebrews is seeking to inspire us to persevere, to keep going as we are in great company. The truth is, many of the saints had less faith than we do. They stumbled, they messed up, they went through desperately dark times wondering "WHY ME?" but they had faith to keep on keeping on.

Then the author swiftly changes his imagery. The daisy chain of saints holding the Cord of faith are now in a stadium, packing the risers and cheering on those of us running the Christian race. To be fair it's probably only John (Gregory) who has had the

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experience of being on the pitch being cheered on by thousands of fans – but it’s just that image we are being given. So what must we do?

Discard anything that hinders and the sin that entangles.

That’s quite direct and a little later in the passage our author gives examples.

Make every effort to live at peace with each other.
Be holy
Let no bitterness grow up among you.
No sexual immorality.
Don’t make irrevocable foolish decisions.

The opportunity to practice all this is right before us every day. As we (slowly) make our way with Transforming Trinity there is the opportunity to practice patience, and humility, making sure we are at peace even when discussions are complex and contradictory, recognising that not a single brick, chair, light bulb or heating element is worth losing our fellowship and love over and that running the race together - is of far greater importance than the fabric of a building.

If we are determined to run the race together...we can overcome all the obstacles and help one another. Teams that are divided rarely win.

Our Gospel reading is in the same vein, how are we to live, how are we to run this race?

Jesus captures the whole of the law and the prophets in a neat answer very familiar to us from the liturgy.

³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’³² There is no commandment greater than these.”

To love God and your Neighbour as yourself (So there’s loving yourself in there too) sums up the race we are running.

And we are to run with persistence, looking to Jesus, not losing heart, not growing weary, which is why to run the race together is SO important.

Because life throws us some serious body blows and it’s when you are stumbling and lagging behind that the love and support and encouragement of your brothers and sisters in Christ make all the difference. When you slip out of fellowship (and it can be very hard if shielding and cautious in the current climate) the race can be harder.

So I pray for those of you staying isolated and withdrawn that you may still be aware of the fellowship we share with phone calls and our lives streams, you are always in our thoughts.

But it can be very very hard to keep walking the life of faith, to keep going.

As verse three of our song says...I’ll walk this narrow road with Christ before me, where thorns and thistles grow and cords ensnare me...

We face battles with our own inner demons, we face battles with them from outside and sometimes it can all just seem too much. What kept the saints of old going?

The same that kept Jesus true to his calling. Joy.

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And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus focussed on the joy to come through the pain and struggle, his death and resurrection.

What waits for us is joy and it's not all joy when this life is over and we head in through the gates of pearl...there is joy as we see and experience His kingdom in the here and now.

And I believe we bring great joy to the Father when we live in the tradition of those faithful saints who have gone before, when we discard sin and all that entangles, when we live by faith, hope and love and share that love...

So – let's commit ourselves to holding to the cord of faith, living in company with our great cloud of witnesses and lets sing together as we chose again to follow.

(The sermon ended and we sang this song together)

Good Shepherd of my soul,
Come dwell within me;
Take all I am and mould
Your likeness in me.
Before the cross of Christ,
This is my sacrifice:
A life laid down and ready to follow.

The troubled find their peace
In true surrender;
The prisoners their release
From chains of anger.
In springs of living grace
I find a resting place
To rise refreshed and ready to follow.

I'll walk this narrow road
With Christ before me,
Where thorns and thistles grow
And cords ensnare me.
Though doubted and denied,
He never leaves my side,
But lifts my head and calls me to follow.

And when my days are gone,
My strength is failing,
He'll carry me along
Through death's unveiling.
Earth's struggles overcome,
Heaven's journey just begun
To search Christ's depths and ever to follow.