

Immanuel, Sunday 31st October 2021

Hebrews 7:23-28 Mark 12:28-34

On All Saints and Our Christian Heroes.

Today is Halloween, or you could call it All Hallows Eve. Hallow, in Old English, means "holy" or "sacred." Therefore, "Hallows' Eve," or "Halloween" simply means "the evening of holy persons" and refers to the evening before All Saints Day, which is tomorrow, November 1 on both Anglican and Catholic calendars.

In the early years when the Roman Empire persecuted Christians, so many martyrs died for their faith, that the Church set aside special days to honour them. For example, in 607AD Emperor Phocas presented to the pope the beautiful Roman Pantheon temple. The pope removed the statues of Jupiter and the pagan gods and consecrated the Pantheon to "all saints" who had died from Roman persecution in the first three hundred years after Christ. Many bones were brought from other graves and placed in the rededicated Pantheon church. Since there were too many martyrs for each to be given a day, they were lumped together into one day. In the next century, All Saints Day was changed by Pope Gregory III to today's date--November 1. People prepared for their celebration with a night of vigil on Hallows' Eve -- Halloween.

In the 10th century, Abbot Odela of the Cluny monastery added the next day--November 2nd--as "All Souls" Day" to honour not just the martyrs, but all Christians who had died. People prayed for the dead, but many unchristian superstitions continued. People in Christian lands offered food to the dead--as it had been in pagan times. The superstitious also believed that on these two days, souls in purgatory would take the form of witches, toads, or demons and haunt persons who had wronged them during their lifetime. As happens so often in Church history, sacred Christian festivals can absorb so many pagan customs that they lose their significance as Christian holidays. This is why today, why tonight, people will dress up as ghosts, or vampires, or zombies.

I've actually no problem with the Gothic side of Halloween. I'm a life-long Christian, but I'm also a life-long horror fan. There's a cathartic element to horror stories and films, but I'm not going to bang on about that in these remarks. I've also noticed a trend in the UK at Halloween that people have started to wear all kinds of fancy dress - not just scary dress - and you're just as likely to bump into a princess or a Marvel superhero at Halloween as you are to meet a Frankenstein's monster.

All Saints/All Souls gives us a chance to celebrate, actually, the life of those who dedicated their time on Earth to serve God, to share faith, and be good Christians. We celebrate the saints, we also celebrate the saintly (not everyone gets to become an official deified saint). But think of Halloween positively. Who are your favourite heroes in Christian History? Can you think of any whose example has inspired you? Why not use All Saints Day to think of and give thanks for as many Christians from the past as you can remember, whether they are famous or not, especially if their lives and teaching contributed something to yours. In the reading from Hebrews today we found out that the best kind of priest, and by extension the best kind of Christian should be holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. I don't know about you, but that for me, is quite a tall order. We're not just in this world, we are of the world, and it's not easy to live a sinless or blameless life. Jesus, however, does fulfil that ideal.

Jesus in fact, in our second reading, gives us something a bit more achievable to aim for. When questioned by the scribes - it's always the scribes - Jesus says first of all you have to love God, second you must love your neighbour as you love yourself.

Love God, Love your Neighbour. It's exactly the same sort of lesson as when Jesus says 'A new commandment I give unto you, you must love one another as I have loved you'. No command has ever been so simple - or indeed ever so complex - especially when you take neighbours to mean everyone -the good, the bad, those you love, those you find difficult to love: The poor maybe? The homeless? The drunk and disorderly? The stranger, the criminal, the fools and those who actively hate you - you must, Jesus says, love them all.

So who are our Christian heroes that we ought to celebrate at this time of year? I'd argue the ones who put their faith ahead of their own interests and attempted to love their neighbour, who reached out to those who needed God's love most.

Being saintly, of course, doesn't mean being a holier than thou type - or a goody two shoes - And in that light, I'd like to talk to you about the Reverend Leon Atkins.

Born in Spalding, Lincolnshire on 26 July 1902, the son of a gas manager, Leon Atkins was one of seven children. The family lived next door to the Methodist chapel, and though they were Anglicans, Leon as a child attended their activities and he became a Methodist. The family moved in 1914 to Biddulph, and in 1916 he became a boy preacher, which brought him a great deal of publicity that he thoroughly enjoyed. After serving an apprenticeship as an engineer he was accepted as a student for the ministry and received his training at the Methodist College in Handsworth, Birmingham. He was appointed Probationer Minister at St John's Church, Risca, Gwent, in 1930.

He was moved in 1932 to the Methodist Central Hall in Bargoed and in a short period of time he transformed the institution. Atkin utilised the large chapel and its schoolroom to assist the unemployed by opening the building every day of the week, and he established a shoe repairing workshop, a barber shop, and a kitchen which provided free meals. He converted part of the building as a hostel for 28 young unemployed people who were denied dole because their fathers earned a few shillings too much under the Means Test. Allowing unemployed, homeless men to lodge at the Central Hall so as to have an address which enabled them to claim benefit angered the authorities and Atkin was threatened with prosecution for 'obstructing the administration of his Majesty's Government'. His response was to criticise the Labour Party (a political party he had joined when he was 16) and the churches in Wales for being so ineffective. The leaders within the Synod were disturbed with him and arranged for him to be moved to Cornwall. Atkin refused to accept their verdict. The Reverend Edward Morgan, a Congregationalist minister in Cardiff, heard of Atkin's refusal, and suggested to a number of chapels belonging to the denomination that they invite him as their Minister. Invitations came from Mountain Ash, Swansea and Ely in Cardiff. Atkin chose the weakest of the three, St Paul's Swansea which only had 12 members and a debt of £2,000. Immediately he began in Swansea his open-air ministry by holding meetings in a place called the Forum. His congregation grew at St Paul's from ten to two hundred on Sunday nights in the winter and to five hundred in the summer.

His relationship with the Congregational Union of England and Wales was fraught with tension as he was not conducive to any positive suggestions on their part and as he had a high profile within the Labour Party against Fascism. On one occasion he confronted Oswald

Mosley when Mosley and his blackshirts visited the town. Taking local heavyweight boxing champion Jimmy Wilde for protection to where Mosley was speaking he told the leader of the British Union of Fascists, "I work for a Jew". When Mosley said "Well, you should not" Atkin revealed his dog collar. The place went into uproar, and Mosely never came back to Swansea again.

In 1940 he discarded his pacifist views and joined the Royal Artillery, but when the United Chaplains Board heard of his decision he was invited to be an Army Chaplain. During his chaplaincy in the Netherlands he heard that his deacons at St Paul's had terminated his ministry, and when he returned to Swansea, he realised that the chapel had been locked. He regained the initiative by his open-air addresses and with the support of ex-servicemen. Atkin settled again at St Paul's, this time without the formal support of the Congregational Union. He battled with the civic authorities in Swansea for illegally showing films on Sunday evenings after the service without a music licence.

Atkin developed his ministry among needy people, and his care for the disadvantaged and the 'down and outs' became known through his articles in the press. In the bitter winter of 1947 his chapel became a refuge for dozens of men who would otherwise have perished. He visited weekly, every Friday, the public houses of Swansea to collect money to enable poor children from Swansea to enjoy Guy Fawkes night and to be taken by him to the circus. Atkin could not be content within any movement or organisation. He was a maverick, an extreme individualist who missed few opportunities to taunt the Nonconformists and the Labourites. His love of alcohol was a failing in the eyes of most ministers and churchgoers in West Glamorganshire. Often, he would drink in Swansea in the company of Dylan Thomas. His life and his witness were unique, and he proved a controversial figure for 42 years in Swansea and District. He died at Swansea on 27 November 1976.

What the story of Leon Atkin shows us is that none of us are perfect, some of us are downright awkward. Atkin was a well-known figure in Swansea, and was uniquely distinctive with his beret and clerical collar. He was unpopular with Labour Party activists and Free Church leaders. He was no friend of authority, but he was - if not a saint - at least a saintly example. One who indeed loved God and loved his neighbour.

And so, this Halloween, and this All Saints Day, let us be good neighbours too. Let's use this time, not just to show kindness to the kids in fancy dress who may knock at our doors, but also to those in our wider society and celebrate those Christians - saints or just saintly - who are now with God, but whose examples serve as lessons to us today. Amen.