

Revelation 7:9-17 and Matthew 5:1-12

- It's a pleasure to be with you, especially talking about this topic. But we have to be careful, as it's a topic that I can get on my soapbox about.
- It's All Saints (or All Hallows) Day, yesterday was All Hallows Eve (Halloween) and tomorrow is All Souls day. Forming a period called Hallowmas or Hallowtide.
- Provide an overview of some of the history and traditions of this day. It's good to have an insight into our Church history occasionally, to understand how we got here.
- But also, hopefully, to challenge you to think about how All Saints and this season of Hallowmas might be useful for us as the Church today.
I'm a big advocate of following the liturgical year, as it helps us to move through our own lives and recognise the ups and downs. Festivals are also a good way of passing down and teaching our beliefs.
- Embrace it and reclaim.

A brief history (of All Saints Day):

- Originally thought to have been celebrated in May when Pope Boniface consecrated the Pantheon in Rome to "The Blessed Mary and all the Martyrs" in 609.
- Evidence that there were anniversary celebrations of this on 13th May.
- Then, in the 8th century, Pope Gregory III moved the date to November 1st.
- 31st October was the date of the Celtic pagan festival of Samhain. It was originally a harvest festival where people marked the end of the light half of the year and prepared to move into the dark half of the year. Livestock were taken down from higher fields and moved into winter pastures.
- This change in season was also associated with being a threshold or liminal festival. A time when the boundaries between this world and spirit worlds were thin, allowing the souls of the dead to move between: – an idea found in other cultures around the world too.
- Whether the Church deliberately moved All Saints to coincide with Samhain we do not know; it is entirely possible, however. After all, it is an effective method of making a new religion palatable. Look how well it has worked with Christmas.
- What we do see is the two festivals influencing each other.
- Eventually, certain customs developed:

- Bonfires, feasts, leaving food out for the spirits, honouring the dead (even laying a place setting for them), wearing costumes to impersonate or to disguise yourself from the spirits, making lanterns to ward off evil spirits, going to visit the graves of loved ones and leaving flowers (traditionally chrysanthemums), travelling from house to house to offer prayers for the deceased in exchange for “soul cakes” or bread.
- And we are able to see how some of our current Halloween traditions have come to be.
- Key points here:
 - This time of year has always been important, across cultures around world, for recognising growing winter and “death” in nature
 - This led to the idea of remembering the dead and recognising the spiritual aspects of this world
 - Church has long used this date as a time to remember the Saints and Martyrs who have gone before us.

So what does it mean for us today?

- I have a suspicion that many of us here at St Tim’s aren’t too hot on our Saints. I certainly have dismissed the idea in the past as Catholic stuff.
- However, the stories of these people - whether famous Saints like Timothy, Hilda or Francis or simply other Christians who have gone before us - are important. Their stories can give us an example to follow, and encouragement when we feel discouraged, even a kick up the bum when we need it.
- The reading from Revelation (7:9-11) presented us with this vision of the Church worshipping God as it should be. We can take some comfort from that vision. Those “Saints” also went through difficulties like us, they too suffered, but we are also presented with the words “God will wipe every tear from their eye.”
- If nothing else, All Saints day should encourage you to look to those examples when needed.
- But, it is also a good time for remembrance and grief. This time of year, as the trees grow bare and it’s getting colder and darker, is a fitting time to acknowledge the people and things we have lost. I personally have found it very useful to have this time each year to light a candle in memory of family members that have died and have a moment of reflection, a moment to cook up their favourite meals and reminisce, a moment to cry. Being able to grieve is healthy.

- Perhaps there are other things we need to grieve too. Perhaps as a society we need to grieve the environmental damage done, perhaps this year we need to grieve the ongoing changes to our lives and struggles as we face COVID. It is a good time to face up to the things that scare us, to acknowledge that things may seem dark.
- But we do all that with that vision in Revelation in mind. We have a hope to hold on to, we have been given a sneak peak at the outcome. We can face the darkness because we have this hope. A hope which soon we will be preparing for during Advent and will celebrate at Christmas.
 - Some of us gathered yesterday for Forest Church and I very briefly spoke about this same thing. I explained the symbolism behind the Chrysanthemum flower at this time. It's a flower which often is still blooming in November, when most other flowers seem to have given up in the cold. It illustrates these ideas nicely.
- This time of year can be difficult. And spending time in this festival, acknowledging our pain and fears can be uncomfortable. But if we can't do it... how can anyone else? If as a church we shy away from the dark places and hide our grief, how can we help bring light to everyone else?