



All Hallows' Eve is just around the corner, and while many of us celebrate Halloween with Trick-or-Treating or parties, it's less common to celebrate 31<sup>st</sup> October as an actual day of Christian worship. How many of you, as you don the pumpkin costume and knock on doors, realised that? What does it mean? Why should it matter?

In this article, which is primarily written for parents, carers and staff within our church schools, and those with any interest in Christian History, will hopefully put this season into a Christian context.

So, what is All Hallows' Eve, exactly?

It's a term we hear a lot this time of year, but might think is interchangeable with "Halloween." That's true in a way—the word "Halloween" comes from shortening "Hallow's Eve"—but it's not *just* that. For Christians, there is a rich history here to take hold of.

So, let's start with the basics. What is a hallow? Well, hallow simply means holy, as the Lord's Prayer suggests ("hallowed be thy name"), so a "hallow" is a holy person—a saint.

All Hallows' Eve, then, is the eve of All Saints' Day—the day the church remembers all the women and men from St. Peter to St. Augustine to St. Thérèse—who have modelled holiness for us throughout the history of the church. There is a great book, written in 2012 by The Reverend Richard Coles (he of *The Communards*, the Vicar of *Strictly* and radio/TV presenter etc) on the subject: *Lives of the Improbable Saints - Darton Longman & Todd Publishing* and it's a really good (and fun/informative read- great illustrations!).

All Saints' Day is followed by All Souls' Day on November 2, the day the church recognizes *all* the faithful departed—that is, every person who has ever lived and died in Christ, whether the church officially recognizes them as a saint or not. On All Souls' Day, many churches hold services that specifically remember loved ones who have died in the last year. In the Old Hills Churches (Powick, Callow End, Madresfield, Guarlford and Newland), we tend to commemorate this on the nearest Sunday to All Souls (2021: 31<sup>st</sup> October – St Peter's Church, Powick at 4pm – check [www.oldhillsmalvern.co.uk](http://www.oldhillsmalvern.co.uk) for more information).

For over a century, the Church has observed All Hallow's Eve as an evening vigil to watch and wait for these two holy days that honour the friends, family, and heroic saints who are now part of the "cloud of witnesses" spoken of in Hebrews 12:1, cheering us on from heaven as we run the race set before us. All Hallows' Eve is similar to Christmas Eve in that we are eagerly and festively anticipating the holy day that follows. So, to recap:

October 31 is All Hallows' (Saints) Eve,  
November 1 is All Saints' Day, and  
November 2 is All Souls' Day.

So, now that you've got the basics, you might be wondering how witches and goblins came to be associated with these holy days on the church's calendar. Again, we need to go back to the mists of church history. It is likely that the origin stems from of a Celtic festival called *Samhain*, which marked the end of the harvest season. The dates of this festival were 31<sup>st</sup> October through to 1<sup>st</sup> November. The Celts believed that beginning at sun down on 31<sup>st</sup> October, the boundary between the dead and alive thinned, and the dead would return home seeking hospitality among the living. If the dead were not appeased, they would wreak havoc on livestock and crops, causing sickness and famine. So, on 31<sup>st</sup> October, the Celts would don costumes, light bonfires, and imitate sorcery practices in order to ward off evil spirits and appease the dead. All hell would break loose and these festivals would often devolve into nights of havoc and terror.

In the year 835, the church took over this pagan festival, setting All Saints Day on 1<sup>st</sup> November, the same day as *Samhain*. They replaced the havoc and mischief created by the *evil* dead on *Samhain* with a hopeful watching, waiting, and celebration of the *holy* dead, God's saints.

This history presents us with two views of death: one as terrifying and haunted, the other as hopeful and holy. The church has chosen the latter, and on 31<sup>st</sup> October we make a party out of it. All Hallows' Eve is an opportunity for Christians everywhere to celebrate the work God has done in and through his saints, and that neither their stories or ours will end in the grave.

In many countries with a Roman Catholic heritage, All Saints Day and All Souls Day have long been holidays in which people take the day off work, go to cemeteries with candles and flowers, and give presents to children, usually sweets and toys. In Mexico and indeed across the world many will celebrate *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead, but neither is this a Latin American version of Halloween. Though related, the two annual events differ greatly in traditions and tone. Whereas Halloween is a dark night of terror and mischief, Day of the Dead festivities unfold over two days in an explosion of colour and life-affirming joy. The theme is death, but the point is to demonstrate love and respect for deceased family members. In towns and cities throughout Mexico, revellers don funky makeup and costumes, hold parades and parties, sing and dance, and make offerings to lost loved ones.

Unlike Halloween, the Day of the Dead is not associated with scary spooks or frightening entities. Indeed, it is a joyful and fun day as death is represented in small sugar sweets in the shape of a skull. Remember the opening scene from the James Bond Film, *Spectre*? Assured that the dead would be insulted by mourning or sadness, *Día de los Muertos* celebrates the lives of the deceased with food, drink, parties, and it recognizes death as a natural part of the human experience, a continuum with birth, childhood, and growing up to become a contributing member of the community.

In 2017 Pixar premiered *Coco*, a movie centred around the Mexican tradition of *Día de los Muertos*—the Day of the Dead. With the film's funny punchlines, likable main character, and emphasis on the value of family, Disney introduced an ancient celebration to millions around the world.

Many Mexicans learn from early childhood that life is brief and has to be respected. By not fearing death, Mexicans are more able to enjoy their time living. A collective celebration of death helps

people appreciate that a positive, compassionate attitude that is associated with Christ's love should ideally be maintained throughout the year. All in all, it is argued that this tradition has survived over the centuries because it offers the opportunity of having a brighter idea about living in this world. In other words, for Mexicans, *Día de los Muertos*, is a celebration of life!

Contemporary Christian responses to Hallowe'en and of *Día de los Muertos* are varied due to the complex development behind their contemporary celebrations. Some churches have maintained a remembrance of the dead at All Hallows and hold special services where those who have lost loved ones in recent years are invited to a special service at which names are read out and candles might be lit in their memory (see above and our parishes' website for how we are doing this across the Old Hills Churches). Indeed, older practices may still occur in which candles are placed on the graves of loved ones maintaining an old Christian custom. This is sometime spotted in our churchyards. If you do it, please use battery operated tealights though!

The question isn't whether we should celebrate All Hallows' Eve or *Día de los Muertos* but how we to celebrate it.

If there is any interest to learn more or reflect these traditions across our communities, may be in 2022 we could follow other parishes and appropriately mark All Hallows with a special event incorporating elements from a range of traditions, and we hope that this will enable us all to remember and give thanks for our departed loved ones, whilst also bringing our community together in a celebration of light and life. Or we could just stay as we are and don the pumpkin head dresses. I do hope not!

To conclude - reflect on this story:

A lady had recently become a Christian and was baptised. Curious, one of her colleagues at work asked her what it was like to be a Christian. The lady was caught off guard and couldn't answer. Then she saw the carved out pumpkin on the doorstep of the office and blurted out: "*well, being a Christian is like being a pumpkin*". She went on and explained:

*Well, God picks you from the pumpkin patch and brings you in and washes off all the dirt on the outside that you got from being around all the other pumpkins. Then he cuts off the top and takes all that yucky stuff out from outside you. He removes all those seeds of doubt, hate, greed etc. He then carves you with a new smiling face and puts his light inside of you to shine for all to see. It is our choice to either stay outside and rot on the vine, or come inside and become something new and bright.*

As you prepare your pumpkin, are you something new and bright? Will you be smiling at Halloween, and beyond? Are you shining with his light?

Every blessing

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*(Based on an article written by The Reverend Mark Badger, Area Dean of the Upton and Malvern CoE Deanery - embellished and revisited for the churches and schools in the Old Hills Malvern Parishes by Reverend Gary Crellin - October 2021)*