

## All Saints 2015



I was surprised last week to be told by a Greek Orthodox friend living in this country that his church was organising a Halloween party for parishioners. “What’s the world coming to?” I said, “the Orthodox and all Byzantine Christians celebrate the feast of All Saints on the Sunday after Pentecost as laid down by St John Chrysostom in 4<sup>th</sup> Century.” I wonder what he would make of people dressed up as witches and ghosts, the fireworks and the millions of pumpkins wasted throughout the world for last night’s partying. Rather like Christmas and Easter, yet another Christian feast, or in this case vigil, has been sacrificed on the altar of modern global consumerism. My Greek friend said, “But, Father, it’s all good clean fun.” What do you think? I can imagine St John Chrysostom upbraiding us today, as he did the wife of the Emperor Arcadius, for

acquiescing in the comfort of total indifference as we allow the world to take over our feasts and celebrations.

In this morning’s second reading we heard St John the Evangelist say, “We are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is.” That is what it means to be a saint: to be a child of God and to live in hope that one day, through no merit of our own but by God’s love, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is. God has created us, his beloved children, to be holy as he is holy. He made us to be saints: through his grace to come to be like him and to live in him for ever in that eternity which is his very life and being. Of course, we have sinned and disobeyed and continue to do so, but God is merciful and he has sent his Son to be our Saviour. Jesus Christ takes our sins away and leads us to salvation. Through his Death and Resurrection, the Holy Spirit is poured out on us, that Spirit of truth and love, who sanctifies us and makes us one with God. Today we find ourselves among the saints, if only in embryonic form, because God is love.

The origin of All Saints Day is alluded to by St Ephrem the Syrian, who speaks of a feast held to celebrate all Christian martyrs, many of whom were unknown by name. However, in the West the feast goes back to 13<sup>th</sup> May 609, when Pope Boniface IV consecrated the Pantheon in Rome for Christian worship. Some of you know it well. A pagan temple dedicated to the worship of the entire pantheon, all the Roman deities, was transformed into a Christian church in honour of all the saints. You could say that in antiquity we had the Christianization of pagan deities, feasts and customs, while today it’s the very opposite: they are reverting back to paganism. Then, on November 1<sup>st</sup> sometime in the middle of 8<sup>th</sup> Century, Pope Gregory III dedicated a chapel in St Peter’s Basilica to “All the Saints” and so the date was changed. It was Pope Gregory IV who, in 835, ordered the Feast of All Saints to be kept throughout the Western Church. What about All Souls? In the Eastern Churches, Saturday is often dedicated to the Faithful Departed, especially during Lent, as it is the day when Jesus lay in the tomb. In the West, although various dates were used locally, it was Saint Odilo of Cluny, who in the 11th Century, chose 2<sup>nd</sup> November for all the monasteries dependent on the Abbey of Cluny. From these the custom spread to other Benedictine monasteries and thence to the Western Church in general.

Now the two feasts do have something in common. We pray to all the saints, known and unknown, loved or forgotten, famous or anonymous, popular and in fashion or simply passé and discarded. Think of all those Celtic saints, whose names we can barely pronounce and whose story is lost in the mists of time, or the most popular saints in medieval England, St Margaret of Antioch and St Catherine of Alexandria, whom few of us sadly would pray to now. Then we pray for all the dead, known and unknown, loved or hated, liked or disliked, famous or anonymous. Death is the great equalizer and, once dead, no one is more important than anyone else: all need our prayers in equal measure, hence the importance of the traditional devotion to the forgotten souls of Purgatory. How important it is to pray for them: one day you and I might well be one of them, longing for someone to pray for us. God, of course, will never forget us; even the hairs on our heads are counted.



God has allowed us to be called his children, says St John, “because of the love he has lavished upon us.” Let us thank the good Lord today for that love, lavish and unconditional, and let us pray that, like all the saints beginning with Our Lady, we might respond to that love by doing his will and loving him above all else and for all eternity.

Amen.