

Halloween

In an article in the *Yorkshire Post*, the Anglican Bishop of Bolton, the Rt Rev David Gillett, wrote:

I share the view of many Christians that large retailers are increasingly keen to commercialise Halloween celebrations in a way that pressurises parents to purchase goods that promote the dark, negative side of Halloween. I am worried that [this] has the potential to trivialise the realities of evil and that occult practices should not be condoned, even if they are only being presented in a caricatured, light-hearted form. Those in the Church supporting a move towards a more positive approach to the event are not being killjoys, but are simply reflecting the concerns of many parents and teachers across the land. The Church of England encourages Christians to celebrate All Saints' Day – the day after Halloween – with bright parties and it's high time we reclaimed the Christian aspects of Halloween.

I include this quote to show that I'm not the only one going on about Halloween. There are also several sites on the internet in which the same concerns are being expressed – especially by Christian contributors.

The word *Halloween* comes from *All Hallows Even'* – literally the evening before the celebration of “all the hallowed”, all the saints of God, on November 1st, but trying to find a reliable and accurate explanation of where our modern Halloween practices came from is by no means easy.

Its origins are probably to be found in the fifth century Celtic pagan ceremonies marking their new year. It was a calendar celebration to do with the arrival of the dark days of winter, but it also had to do with the pagan belief that the spirits of those who had died during the year roamed about that night in search of a living body they could possess for the year ahead. So on the night of October 31st, people would make their homes as cold and unwelcoming as possible and parade around in frightening costumes to keep the spirits away. As the centuries passed people continued to dress up, specifically as hobgoblins, ghosts and witches, but perhaps without realising exactly why. The purpose of the turnip or pumpkin jack-o'-lantern may also have been to frighten the spirits away. It also became common for pranks to be carried out as if done by the spirits - perhaps the origins of “mischief night” and “trick-or-treating”.

With the establishment of the Christian calendar, October 31st became the eve of All Hallows (All Saints day) but had no other significance. So Hallow's Eve (or E'en) doesn't seem to have grown out of evil practices as such and so, if the name itself came from the Christian calendar, why has it now become associated as much as it has with devils and the even darker practices of Satanism,

witchcraft and the occult? Indeed Halloween is a particularly significant date on the calendar for those involved in such practices – and there is a lot more of it about than most people realise. Part of the answer has to do with how commercialised Halloween has become and, as a consequence, people seeing it as just a harmless bit of fun, a classic example of *desensitisation* - failing to see things as they really are.

Let's take another example – that of Bonfire Night. Every year the whole country celebrates November 5th with bonfires and fireworks, but what exactly is being celebrated?

On the night of November 5th, 1605, Guy Fawkes was arrested in the cellars of the Houses of Parliament where he was about to ignite a cache of gunpowder. Fawkes was a member of – though not its leader – a gang of Catholics plotting the death of King James I and his Protestant parliament. Some of the gang escaped but Fawkes and others were arrested, tried and executed. Bonfires were lit across the land to celebrate the safety of the king, an action that became an annual celebration which continues to this day with the addition of burning an effigy of Guy Fawkes on those bonfires (even though he was hanged, not burned at the stake). What, though, are *we* doing when *we* celebrate Bonfire Night?

If it once was a celebration of the specific fact that Catholic plotters were caught and executed, the reality faded over the centuries and it became more a celebration of the fact that the plot never succeeded regardless of who the perpetrators were. However it just might make us pause and think whether as Catholics we should be celebrating the execution of Catholics, but then our sympathies shouldn't be with the plotters of such a murderous act whatever their religious motivation. Of course it does beg the question as to whether Bonfire Night is long-past its “best by” date. Does a foiled plot really still have that much political significance that we continue to mark the date over four centuries later?

The point I am making is that we can become desensitised to the reality behind what we are doing – whether on Bonfire Night or, in this case, on Halloween – and the fact that *what* we are doing is actually driven and promoted solely by commercial interests.

When I was a kid, Halloween was an evening of harmless fun. We had already done “mischievous night” on the 30th and therefore Halloween was only to do with turnip lanterns (pumpkins weren't really available) and dressing up as witches and ghosts – but nothing evil, nothing sinister. I suppose dressing as a witch was somewhat questionable come to think of it though, as kids, we probably only had the fairytale image in mind and certainly not the darker aspect of witchcraft. And ours were simple homemade costumes, not the modern mass-

produced stuff, the sale of which (weeks beforehand) lines the pockets of our supermarkets and novelty shops.¹ The American practice of going door-to-door “trick-or-treating” had yet to cross the Atlantic we just played around in the street close to our home trying to scare passers-by and other kids, and maybe telling one another ghost stories. Nowadays children are dressed up as monsters and, more worrying still, as devils – where did that come from? Do parents ever stop to think what their children are doing, what they are *letting* them do?

During the baptismal rite, and during the renewal of baptismal promises at Easter, all present are asked: “Do you reject Satan? And all his works? And all his empty promises?” All who are serious about their Christian faith and their own baptismal promises answer emphatically: “I do!” It can sometimes make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up because it is a very serious declaration and there is something very powerful about such a communal rejection of the devil and his works. In fact if the reply is mumbled I will often repeat the question until I get an appropriately convincing response! Why, then, on Halloween, do so many Christian parents allow their children to dress up as devils? Why do so many people participate in Halloween activities which, if not actually courting evil and occultism, walk a very thin line of association with those dark things that have no place in our lives as Christians?

Typically (and dismissively) people will say: “It’s only a bit of fun” – fun for whom? Whose image is being promoted? Whose work may thereby being done for him? Isn’t it blurring the lines between good and evil for children? And, anyway, what do such things have to do with All Hallows and the celebration of the lives of the saints? Increasingly Christian denominations and church leaders are now speaking out, out of their concern for the sort of things that are typically a part of Halloween. Many offer Christian-based gatherings as an alternative activity, particularly for children. Can we not find other, and better, things to do given the reality that, when we get involved in that darker side of things, we are doing the devil’s work for him by promoting his image? We really need to be more aware, more discerning, and to look at things more objectively.²

What acceptable alternatives are there?

Sadly, in this day and age, many traditional activities may not hold much appeal to children anymore: things like apple-bobbing, making toffee and toffee apples, carving turnip/pumpkin lanterns and so on. “Trick-or-treating” may be OK in harmless, fun costumes and where it doesn’t cause a nuisance to others.

¹ And just take a look at some of those costumes. What do they have to do with the eve of All Saints?

² Manchester United, for example, has a red devil on its club badge and this has become the team’s nickname. Most people don’t even give the badge, or the name, a second thought which may be just as well given the international profile of the club and therefore the international promotion that image receives. But that’s precisely the problem – people have lost sight of the reality.

(I know of elderly people who have suffered foulmouthed abuse from youngsters when they hadn't any sweets to give or because they refused to open their door at night.) For a number of reasons "trick-or-treating" isn't the safest of activities anyway these days. Most obvious is the fact of young children often being allowed to wander the streets at night without an accompanying adult. It has also been known for needles, pins and pieces of razorblade to be concealed in sweets and fruit being given to children. The obvious solution is to not let children go "trick-or-treating" in the first place³, or to only allow them to go to the houses of trusted neighbours.

All things considered, perhaps it shouldn't be called Halloween anymore because, clearly, much of what goes on that night has nothing to do with it being the eve of All Saints, and what is meant to be holy has in many cases become decidedly unholy. But then, where does parental discernment come into the picture? If a parent wouldn't deliberately put their child at physical risk on Halloween, why wouldn't they also want to keep them from spiritual risk, teaching them about that blurred line between spiritual good and evil?

The saying has it that idle hands are the devil's playground. I wonder whether the same might be said of desensitisation when it dulls our awareness of the demands of our Christian faith and our Christian witness. We have to stand up and be counted and, if that ever seems a pain, we need only look to the cross and the pain Our Lord bore for us. As we have said, the baptismal rite asks: "Do you reject Satan? And all his works? And all his empty promises?" Hopefully a resounding "We do" is our answer to each of those questions, in which case please don't let your children dress up like him; don't get involved in things that have to do with his works and his efforts to persuade us that "it's only a bit of fun". Again - fun for whom? Whose image is being promoted? Whose work may thereby being done for him?

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Fr Neil McNicholas

³ Why do children even need to be "begging" door-to-door for sweets? – which is what it amounts to.