

Column

A joke that has been around the block many times goes like this:

A family returns home from church. Over Sunday lunch, a member of the family who had been unable to attend asks: “What did the preacher preach on?” Grandpa, who is deaf as a post and regularly sleeps through sermons, responds, ‘sin’. (He felt safe in giving this answer since preachers almost always have something to say on this subject.)

After a moment of silence, comes a follow-up question: “Was he fer it or ag’in it?”

‘Preachers’ and Christians at large at times get asked the same question concerning the holiday that is quickly approaching, All Hallow’s Eve, better known today as Halloween. What should we say?

I think my answer would be that much of what happens on this night is innocent enough. Dressing up, collecting candy and feigning fright makes for a good evening. Let the children have their fun.

Of course, if you are up to no-good or involved in anything that is not motivated by love of God and neighbor, leave it alone. The same would apply to any activity – whether done on Halloween or any other day – which could be seen as compromising your Christian witness. Let your conscience, informed by the Holy Spirit, be your guide.

With that said, what is not to be missed is what comes the day after. Nov. 1 is All Saints’. On this day, the focus shifts from darkness and death to light and life. In particular, the spotlight is directed onto those washed and cleansed from the muck of this world and whose lives have been made beautiful by the Spirit of the living God dwelling in them.

Addressing those who have experienced this wonderful transformation, the apostle Peter says: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

The New Testament refers to these as ‘saints’. Later in Christian history, this designation will get narrowed down to a special class of the especially holy, but

not in the Bible. All who have been united to Christ in faith and baptism are 'called to be saints' (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Some of these 'saints' may have a long way to go before reaching anything like spiritual perfection. Saints, nevertheless, they are.

Indeed, this is the situation Paul addresses in his first letter to the Corinthians. He begins by calling those who have given their allegiance to Jesus Christ saints, but then proceeds to chastise them for some very un-saint-like behaviour. How can this be?

The Greek word from which we get our English word 'saint' means 'set apart'. Again, all those who have been united to Jesus Christ have been set apart for His service, but they are still works in progress. C.S. Lewis speaks of wearing the mask first and then allowing our face to grow into that mask. A pretty good illustration, I think.

This process of transformation requires grace on God's part. It does not come about through our own unaided efforts or by following some prescribed program of self-improvement. Nevertheless, there IS work for us to do.

The road to sainthood requires discipline. Just as a good soldier must give single-minded attention to the rigors of army life, so must the soldier of the cross. A wise man has said: "Without discipline faith remains pallid and unproductive." But how might we go about getting and applying this discipline. Let me offer five suggestions:

1. Be disciplined in prayer. Without prayer there is no vital experience of God.

2. Be disciplined in devotion to scripture. The Bible is more than a collection of 'stories', it is in fact the great story, the story of where we came from, what our problem is, what God has done to put things right and what God requires of us. The story comes alive as we find our place in it.

3. Be disciplined in study. Without study we remain preschoolers in the faith. Study in itself will not save the soul, but without study our roots wither and die.

4. Be disciplined in obedience to the Holy Spirit. Only obedience enables us to grow and develop as saints.

5. Be disciplined in reflecting on the lives of great Christians in the past – the Saints. Let their fidelity to the Faith in spite of hardships and persecutions encourage you as you make your way toward the finish line.

Halloween is just around the corner. If it is your custom, celebrate the innocent bits of fun on this night, but don't remain in the darkness represented by skulls and black hats. Turn the calendar. Open the curtains. Aim at being a saint, a child of the light!

Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys which thou hast prepared for those who unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for All Saints', The Book of Common Prayer)

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.