

## **Sermon for All Hallow's Eve**

### **Happy Celtic New Year, All Hallow's Eve, and Reformation Sunday!**

The night of Samhain, (Sah-ween) is one of the principal festivals of the Celtic calendar, and falls on the October 31. It represents the final harvest. It is still the custom in some areas to set a place for the dead at the Samhain feast, and to tell tales of the ancestors on that night.

Traditionally, Samhain was time to take stock of the herds and grain supplies, and decide which animals would need to be slaughtered in order for the people and livestock to survive the winter.. Samhain was the traditional time for slaughter, for preparing stores of meat and grain to last through the coming winter.

With the bonfire ablaze, the villagers extinguished all other fires. Each family then solemnly lit its hearth from the common flame, thus bonding the families of the village together. Often two bonfires would be built side by side, and the people would walk between the fires as a ritual of purification.

A Gaelic custom of wearing costumes and masks, was an attempt to copy the evil spirits or placate them. In Scotland the dead were impersonated by young men with masked, veiled or blackened faces, dressed in white. Candle lanterns, carved from turnips were part of the traditional festival. Large turnips were hollowed out, carved with faces, placed in windows to ward off evil spirits.

Samhain became the Halloween we are familiar with when Christian missionaries attempted to change the religious practices of the Celtic people. As a result of their efforts to wipe out "pagan" holidays, such as Samhain, Christians succeeded in effecting major transformations in it. In 601 A.D. Pope Gregory issued a now famous edict to his missionaries concerning the native beliefs and customs of the peoples he hoped to convert. . Rather than try to obliterate native peoples' customs and beliefs, the pope instructed his missionaries to use them: if a group of people worshipped a tree, rather than cut it down, he advised them to consecrate it to Christ and allow its continued worship.

Samhain, with its emphasis on the supernatural, was decidedly pagan. While missionaries identified their holy days with those observed by the Celts, they branded the earlier religion's supernatural deities as evil, and associated them with the devil. As representatives of the rival religion, Druids were considered evil worshippers of devilish or demonic gods and spirits. The Celtic underworld inevitably became identified with the Christian Hell.

The effects of this policy were to diminish but not totally eradicate the beliefs in the traditional gods. Celtic belief in supernatural creatures persisted, while the church made deliberate attempts to define them as being not merely dangerous, but malicious. Followers of the old religion went into hiding and were branded as witches.

The Christian feast of All Saints was assigned to November 1st. The day honored every Christian saint, especially those that did not otherwise have a special day devoted to them. This feast day was meant to substitute for Samhain, to draw the devotion of the Celtic peoples, and, finally, to replace it forever. That did not happen, but the traditional Celtic deities diminished in status, becoming fairies or leprechauns of more recent traditions.

The old beliefs associated with Samhain never died out entirely. The powerful symbolism of the traveling dead was too strong, and perhaps too basic to the human psyche, to be satisfied with the new, more abstract Catholic feast honoring saints. Recognizing that something that would subsume the original energy of Samhain was necessary, the church tried again to supplant it with a Christian feast day in the 9th century. This time it established November 2nd as All Souls Day—a day when the living prayed for the souls of all the dead. But, once again, the practice of retaining traditional customs while attempting to redefine them had a sustaining effect: the traditional beliefs and customs lived on, in new guises.

Guisers — men in disguise, were prevalent in 16th century in the Scottish countryside. Children going door to door "guising" and wearing masks, carrying turnip lanterns, offering entertainment of various sorts in return for food or coins, remained a tradition in the 19th century, and continued well into 20th century. At the time of mass transatlantic Irish and Scottish immigration that popularized Halloween in North America, Halloween in Ireland and Scotland had a strong tradition of guising and pranks.

As Halloween today is a celebration of joy rather than fear of dead witches and goblins, so is the story of Zacchaeus who is happy and not afraid, to welcome Jesus into his home. It's a new day for the tax collector, who feels God's mercy and love reaching him through the love and acceptance of Jesus. The gospel is certainly "good news" for him: ... – healing and wholeness .. – has come this very day not just personally to him but to his entire household .... Zacchaeus joyfully welcomes Jesus, in contrast to the rich ruler who left Jesus, sad, because he couldn't let go of his possessions even to know joy and peace... It requires the grace of God for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, we recall, nothing less than a miracle: "Zacchaeus, then, represents the miracle," and he gives away extravagantly more than what is required. What kind of trust is necessary to offer half of our possessions to the poor?..

There is, finally, the uncomfortable question of our role in the suffering of others because of economic injustice, our failure to share freely, like Zacchaeus. One could make a case that Zacchaeus is stuck in such a system and sincerely wants to make reparation for his gain from it. He understands that he can't just enjoy the benefits and not do something about those who suffer from his enjoyment. Perhaps the most difficult reality is that we who live and participate in and benefit from an unjust and hurtful system (as Zacchaeus did) are not able to claim personal holiness if we turn away from seeing our complicity in such a system. "The fact is," Fred Craddock writes, that "one is not privately righteous while participating in a corrupt system that robs and crushes other persons." Perhaps one answer to the question about Zacchaeus is that he *responded wholeheartedly to God's radical grace in his life*, just as we're invited to respond to our encounter with Jesus and to God's grace in our lives with generosity, and in so doing, to experience our own lives, and the life of the world, transformed. Like Zacchaeus, we will find that nothing is the same any more.

From articles by Kate Huey, Jack Santino, and Wikipedia,