

## Sermon Transcript

### 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021

**VIDEO:** Hallowe'en: Trick or Truth?

#### MONTY PYTHON FOOT

I think that gives you some idea of what I think of Hallowe'en. Anything that trivialises or even "bigs up" evil and the occult fills me with concern. It may be a season of fun, but it involves things that also feed fear, superstition and unbelief in the true things of God. Many articles I've read make a connection between Hallowe'en and our pagan past.

#### ALLHALLOWTIDE

On the other hand, there are many who stress Hallowe'en's Christian origins. Allhallowtide was, and is, a three days feast celebrated between 31<sup>st</sup> October and 2<sup>nd</sup> November in the UK. It consists of All Hallows Eve, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day in western traditions and is still celebrated in Catholicism and to a lesser extent in Anglicanism. Allhallowtide is a time to remember the Christian dead, including martyrs, saints, and all faithful departed believers. It's sometimes called the season of the dead.

If that's what we do, then there is nothing wrong with that, as the faithful example of those that came before us should encourage us to trust God as we face the future. We did a little bit of that a couple of weeks back when we considered the witness of the Ipswich Martyrs. But in Protestant tradition, we've never seen the need to mark All Saints as such.

#### MUDDY PUDDLE

When it comes to looking more closely at the origins of Hallowe'en, the puddle starts to get muddier. All Saints Day was established by Pope Gregory III (731–741) and set to 1<sup>st</sup> November as that coincided with most pagan harvest festivals in Europe and he wanted to tap into the festivities and fervour and Christianise it. In the early 11th century, the modern date of All Souls' Day was popularized, after Abbot Odilo established it as a day for the monks of Cluny and associated monasteries to pray for the dead. By the Middle Ages, the present Allhallowtide had been established, with a vigil on All Hallows Eve (Hallowe'en), the veneration of the Saints the following day and the veneration of all souls who had died in Christ on the day after that (November 2<sup>nd</sup>). Allhallowtide was abolished as an official Christian festival in England by Queen Elizabeth 1.

The reason why the water gets muddy with Hallowe'en, is that it is one thing to remember those who have died, even to celebrate their lives and praise God for them, but should we venerate them and pray for them, or to them? It seems that right from the start, well-intentioned Christianity got itself mixed up with paganism. It's common for the Christian faith to get mixed up with thinking and practices that have nothing to do with Christ, and everything to do with pagan rituals or just with the popular culture of the world around. It's called syncretism. In a few weeks we will have Christmas: a time when we most casually mix paganism and popular culture with the Christian faith and think little of it.

In the case of Allhallowtide, we find that praying to or for the spirits of the dead just isn't in the Bible. It somehow found its way in from paganism and also from the medieval error of Purgatory where people prayed that their loved ones would have a quick journey through Purgatory and into Heaven.

Here in the British Isles, another element of paganism entered into Allhallowtide as it coincided with a Celtic pagan festival, Samhain. It was a festival to celebrate the end of harvest and to

recognise the coming of long nights and there were various activities to ward off spirits from the "Otherworld" such as bonfires and meals and food offerings to appease the spirits. Of course it was a time to of revelry. At such meals, seats would be reserved for dead kin, and people would wear all sorts of strange costumes and go around houses reciting verses in exchange for food and to fool the spirits into thinking they were someone else. The tradition developed of making ugly lamps out of vegetables to frighten spirits away. Much of this got into the Christian Hallowe'en by it becoming a night of revelry rather than one of godly vigil.

Hallowe'en was exported to North America from Europe as people migrated there, and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became heavily commercialised and re-imported in US form to Britain, with pumpkins trick and treating and the rest.

So Hallowe'en is an eclectic mix of the Biblical, the heretical, idolatry and popular culture; with it being in different measures and combinations depending on country. Here is a secular travel video that takes us through some of the different observances of Hallowe'en worldwide. It's not brilliantly accurate but gives us a flavour of what's out there and how stuff is mashed and mixed together.

### **TRAVEL VIDEO**

#### **HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS REACT TO HALLOWE'EN?**

So Hallowe'en is a mix of the good, the bad and the ugly. How should Christians react to it? There are three broad approaches

#### **AVOID**

Many Christians try to avoid it. That can be difficult when there is commercial pressure on children to want Hallowe'en products or to go to Hallowe'en events. And what do you do when Trick and Treaters call? Give them some sweets and an invitation to church? Or shut off the lights and pretend to be out?

#### **RECLAIM**

Christians have tried ways to reclaim the real purpose of Allhallowtide by having services that focus on the example of those past, or by having light parties It's seen as an opportunity to share the truth of God in Christ. In America many churches have their harvest festivals around Hallowe'en.

#### **EMBRACE**

Others just say "embrace it, go with the flow" It's just a harmless piece of fun. It's the approach of the secular world. We shouldn't take the bits about witches, ghosts creepy things and all that seriously – and besides, it's profitable. In America it is common for churches to have Hallowe'en parties with all the trimmings.

#### **BUT IS IT HARMLESS FUN?**

I hear people say; "what's wrong with people enjoying themselves? The pagan and occult bits simply involve gods that don't exist, so what does it matter?"

Or is there is more to it than this? In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul had to deal with an issue where some Christians were eating food that had been offered to idols in pagan temples because it was cheaper than the market. They gave the logic that as there is only one God, the meat had only been offered to lumps of wood or stone, so it didn't matter. But there were others in the church offended that they were eating foods offered to another god.

Initially Paul says to show respect to weaker brethren and respect one another, but were those who thought they had superior knowledge about pagan gods just being lumps of wood or stone. The demolition of their argument and attitude takes up chapters 9 and 10 and Paul ends up telling

them not to participate in idolatry in any form. In 1 Corinthians 10:14 he says this FLEE FROM IDOLATRY then adds these words:

*Consider the people of Israel: do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?*

In modern Hallowe'en we find symbols of evil, death, paganism, superstition, witchcraft, and idolatry. They are all things we are called to flee from and that's a consistent command of God to His people right through the whole Bible from beginning to end. Why? The symbols may seem innocent, even fun, but what's behind them is demonic as Paul wrote.

Whatever the nobility of the origins of Allahllow's Eve, it has descended into what it currently is; and I would give the same advice on it as Paul: *21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?*

In other words, you know what God has commanded. Why are you trying to push your luck with Him? That's not a good idea.

RECOGNISE THE EXISTENCE OF PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

The upshot is not that we deny Hallowe'en, but that we acknowledge the existence of what, or who is there. Here's what Paul says in Ephesians 6:

*10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

In two weeks we are going to mark Remembrance Sunday. I'll be focussing on the death and destruction by an enemy who came at night. We never saw them, only heard the roar of their engines and experienced the destruction their bombs brought. Ordinary people were powerless to do anything. But there were those who were prepared to sacrifice their lives, who did have power to expose the bombers, and the enemy were eventually deterred.

We have spiritual enemies. Enemies we can't see, but we can see their sin and destruction. Satan and his forces, demons, are active in this world. How can we counter an enemy who wants to destroy people when we don't know everything about him and don't have the ability to counter him?

CELEBRATE THE VICTORY JESUS HAS OVER them and over death.

Jesus has already had victory of sin and death on the cross. The enemy already has been defeated, but as we know, some enemies will never surrender and this one still prowls around like a roaring lion waiting for anyone he can devour (1 Peter 5:8), until the time the Lord comes to mop him up.

But because we have Jesus, *He who is within us is greater than he who is in the world* (1 John 4:4) so we are overcomers because of Him. Hallowe'en should be a symbol of the overcoming Christ, not a symbol of an enemy who should be feared when we're not partying. Ephesians 6 goes on to tell us that as God's people, we are more than equipped to deal with the enemy.

*13 Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.*

We don't fear him when put our armour on, when we use our weapon, the word of God and when we pray in the Spirit and rely on God's power. For us, Hallowe'en reminds us to flee from the idolatry it now represents, to focus on Jesus who armours us, who equips us and empowers us by His Spirit.

When we walk with Him, when we pray in Jesus name, when we resist the enemy in Jesus' name – he flees from us. That's when we should never have truck with anything that is about fear, superstition, ignorance or even the horror of death – that's just enemy propaganda.

LOOKING BACK TO THE SAINTS OF OLD SHOULD MAKE US LOOK FORWARD. LOOKING BACK TO WHAT WE LEFT KEEPS US IN FEAR

In looking back we see that Jesus brings victory over death: He is about light and life. There's nothing wrong in remembering the great saints of old, or even the Lord's grace to those who have gone before whom we loved and they loved Jesus. That's at the heart of Allhallowtide but I must say as Protestants we do that at any time because that's what the Bible is about – it's packed full of great stories of those past that we may be spurred on to love and good works.

But there everything wrong with giving space to that which opposes us, that which causes others to sin, that which destroys the world around us. And we come against the enemy because he wants to drag us backwards and make us look at where we came from, not where God is calling us to now. In Jesus' name, let's re-affirm our call, let's pray.

CONFESSION

Thank You Father, that You have taken us out of darkness and into the glorious presence of Christ. Thank You that we share in His victory and have the power to live His risen life.

We come against all those principalities and powers, the person of satan and his demons in the name of Jesus. We thank You that Jesus has He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them on the cross.

At this Hallowe'en may you confirm in us that He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.

We pray that we may be able to say and do something positive in the lives of those we know who don't know You and think Hallowe'en is just a stupid thing for kids. Might they see behind the words to see Hallowe'en for what it is, but also see beyond that to Jesus, who has conquered over sin, over death, over principalities and powers, over spirits and demons in this world, over the hopelessness they bring, over the trivialisation of spiritual things that they stand for and may the light of Jesus shine through.

Lord Jesus, have the power and the glory in people's lives as they find life and hope in You.

We ask this in Your name.

Amen.

## **For Reflection & Discussion**

1. How did you mark Hallowe'en in your younger days. How has it changed from your experience in the last few decades? Was it fun or harmful?

*Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-22*

2. In what ways do you think that Hallowe'en is a form of idolatry? In what ways do you think it presents spiritual danger to those who think it is nothing but a bit of innocent fun?

3. There are a number of situations in the Bible where flirting with or even embracing idolatry had serious consequences for the Israelites and the early church. Pool your knowledge or look upon Google to work out what God's attitude was to other gods.

*Read Ephesians 6:10-18*

4. We are struggling with "principalities and powers" – enemies we only have limited knowledge about. Even that being so, why can we have confidence that we are overcomers. That being the case, why are we commanded to flee from idolatry?

5. How may the modern observance be harmful to individuals and society?

## **1 Corinthians 10:14-22**

14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.

15 I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

18 Consider the people of Israel: do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?