

All Saint's Sunday Homily
November 2, 2008

In her book entitled "The Celtic Year", Shirley Toulson explains that in the ancient Celtic tradition, the year was divided into two halves, a light half and a dark half. To the Celts, time was circular rather than linear. This is reflected in the custom of beginning each day and thus each festival at dusk rather than dawn, a custom comparable with that of the Jewish Sabbath. The first festival of the Celtic year, Samhain (saw-in), or seed-fall, the Coming of the Dark, was the beginning of the year celebrated in November, not in January as in our calendar year. Toulson writes, "The Celtic year begins in November at the fallow time of the agricultural cycle, the start of winter, a time of death, darkness and rest. It is also more than coincidence that the beginning of the Celtic year comes at the start of winter, a few weeks later than the High Holy Days with which the Jewish New Year begins. Both races count time from the cycle of dark to light, and not as we do with the return of the sun from the winter solstice."

Certainly we have noticed our days getting shorter and shorter and the dark is upon us earlier and earlier. I also notice the quality of the light is different, diffused, muted, less bright as in the summer. The Celtic Christians, whose forbearers were Druids, were beginning to adopt the Christian faith, but also had roots in the folk lore of their ancestors. This time was thought of as the thinnest time of the year. A time when the darkness got close, very close, and was overtaking the light. The darkness was not just in reference to the lack of daylight only but also the darkness of the underworld, the beyond place, the afterlife, the unknown. It was the time when the spirit world came as close to being in our world as it possibly could with the threat to overtake. It was a nervous time, a time when death was just around the corner, lurking and hovering over the peoples, menacing and disturbing the ordinary and every day life. During the long, cold winter months, when fresh food would be scarce, illness and disease would have free reign and it was a known fact that many would not live to see spring.

In our Anglican tradition, this Sunday, the first Sunday of November is All Saint's Sunday, when we remember and hold before us the memory of all those who have gone before us, our family and friends and also people of note, saints, who have died. A bittersweet remembrance. Mournful because we no longer see our loved ones, sweet because of our hope and belief that they are in God's presence and light.

It can be a hard concept for us to understand what happens to our loved ones and eventually to us when we die. We quite often hear words that are meant to bring us comfort when we suffer the loss of a loved one. That our loved one is now with God, in God's presence, in peace, in light and that we too shall be joined with them one day. Unfortunately, sometimes these words give the impression that things will be just as they had been on earth. That things will be just as there were when our loved one was still with us, only better. It is on that point that Jesus does share the view of the Pharisees that life after death is a reality but he does not share in the Pharisees belief in some kind of physical resurrection of the body, as opposed to the spiritual body, at the last judgment. Life after death, Jesus says, is like that of the angels in heaven, a higher order of being where there is perfect communion with God.

Many times we focus on *everlasting* life, the sense of life that goes on and on after death and never ends. Who will we meet in heaven? What will heaven be and look like? Will our loved ones recognize us? But what if instead of focusing on everlasting life, we focused on *eternal* life, life in relationship to God which will go on for eternity? With our focus on eternal life, we must die to sin, here and now, and commit ourselves to Christ. In doing so, it won't matter what happens to our mortal body. The death of our physical body will be unimportant and cannot affect our relationship with God. What needs to die, what we need to help die, is our sin, our sinfulness, what ever it is that takes us from and out of relationship with God. When we move through and from the darkness, when we brace ourselves to withstand the thin line between evil and good, the unholy, the demons which threaten us, we then can allow the light of Christ to shine within us and around us and through us. And to shine that light on others. Our candles here today not only stand as memorials to our loved ones, but remind us that the light of Christ is present, with them and with us. Christ overcame the darkness.

We will not know for certain what happens to us after death and the nature of our life beyond. And we need not worry about that. What should be of far more worry and therefore of far more concern and effort on our part is to seek a deeper and more profound relationship and knowledge of God now. On second thought, worry? Well, no, we need not worry because God loves us. When we fail and fall into darkness, he still loves us and beckons us back. He loves us and desires us to be in relationship with him. He holds our lives, here and in the world to come, where we will be reunited with those whom we have loved and lost and who have passed on before us into the great fellowship of God's children in heaven. This is all we need to know. We can leave the rest to God. See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God and that is what we are, blessed. Amen.

The Rev. Canon Deacon Jane Ann Luck