

Message for November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:9-17

I was amused by the editorial cartoon that appeared in last Sunday's edition of the Toronto Star. It depicted a man walking by a rather old-fashioned looking cemetery. There was a monster, a skeleton, a ghost and a witch in the graveyard and all four of them were doing their best to scare him. The man however was reading a newspaper and totally ignored them. "Meh", he said. The message of the cartoon was obvious. What are monsters, skeletons, ghosts and witches compared to the news of the day, especially with the current pandemic? What is actually happening in the world around us is far more frightening than any creatures of our imagination could ever be.

Last evening was of course Halloween and the weeks leading up to it were marked by debate and controversy over whether or not the children should be allowed to go trick or treating. On one side were those, including medical experts, politicians and others, who vehemently said that the answer was 'no' as it was too dangerous. On the other side of the debate were those including once again medical experts, politicians and others who just as vehemently said that the risks of celebrating Halloween were in fact fairly low, especially when compared to other activities that many of the children are doing including going to school. And besides they said, the kids have already seen so many of the activities and events that they normally enjoy cancelled. Indeed looking ahead, so many of the events and activities that they enjoy at Christmas have already been cancelled as well. Was it really necessary then to cancel Halloween too? The debate raged and in the end it was pretty much left to the parents to do as they best saw fit.

I must confess that I have always rather enjoyed Halloween. As a child I loved dressing up and going around the neighbourhood collecting candy. As a parent I enjoyed carving the pumpkin and taking our kids out around the neighbourhood. Now I get a kick out of looking at the kids dressed in their various costumes who come to the door to collect their

candy. Halloween however is no longer just for the children; in recent years more and more adults have been celebrating Halloween too, dressing up and having their own parties and get-togethers. Indeed Halloween is now big business and is generally regarded as an occasion for everyone to have some good innocent fun. It wasn't always this way though.

The roots of Halloween go back thousands of years and it originated as a festival celebrated by the ancient Celts. They called it 'Samhain' and believed that sunset on the last day of October marked the end of summer. With the end of summer the time of darkness was upon them and they knew, they just knew, that on that night the spirits, monsters and the like were let loose to roam the earth. In an effort to scare them off they lit huge bonfires and for the same reason carved scary-looking faces on hollowed out turnips. Truly the original Halloween, unlike our own, was a spooky and even terror-filled occasion when the people huddled around their fires waiting for the dawn.

In an effort to combat this, the church introduced what was called 'All Saints Day'. It was held on the day after Halloween and on that day, November the 1st, everyone was supposed to remember the great Christian saints of days gone by. It was hoped that by doing this the people would forget about the fear of the night before. Then, some time later, the church brought in yet another special day. November the 2nd was called 'All Souls Day' and on that day everyone was encouraged to remember all of the people whom they knew who had died and were now with God in heaven. And since they were with God there were no ghosts to be feared! Why then get all worked up at Halloween? But while the intent was good, it failed. The old superstitions continued to thrive and in fact Halloween even cast its shadow over both 'All Saints' and 'All Souls' days. They became gloomy occasions when some people, far from just remembering that their loved ones were with God, actually started to worship them. Some people even began taking gifts to the graves so that their dead relatives wouldn't bother them in the coming year! But then came the Reformation.

The response of the Reformers was simple and to the point; they decided to do away with it all. They abolished both 'All Saints' and 'All Souls' days but they failed to get rid of Halloween. After thousands of years, it couldn't be abolished so easily and so Halloween, continually evolving, has survived to this day. But while we Protestants abolished 'All Saints' and 'All Souls' days hundreds of years ago, an increasing number of people in recent years have been asking whether the Reformers threw out the good while trying to get rid of the bad. Is it possible that there is a legitimate and perhaps even a necessary place for these two days in our church calendar?

For a growing number of Protestant theologians the answer is 'yes'. For this reason many churches now celebrate today, the first Sunday in November, as 'All Saints Sunday'. Today, like next Sunday, is a day of remembrance but while next Sunday we will remember our war dead, today we remember our own who have passed away. Today is an occasion when, without being sad or depressed about it, we are encouraged to remember our loved ones who are no longer with us and to thank God for their lives and all that they have meant, still mean and always will mean to us. Today however we are not just encouraged to remember and thank God for our loved ones now with Him; today we are also encouraged to remember our own ultimate future as well, that there is indeed a life yet to come. That in fact is the principal message of this morning's scripture passage.

John's Book of Revelation is easily the hardest book of the Bible to understand and it's not hard to see why. Some of what John wrote was a commentary on what was happening in the world around him at that time. The Christians were being persecuted by the government and so John wrote to offer his fellow Christians both strength and courage. For safety reasons though John didn't identify Rome by name, calling it Babylon instead. His book in fact is full of such code words that while largely unintelligible to us, made perfect sense to his original readers. Besides writing about his present times though, John also prophesied about the future as well and once again he used different code words. The result of all this has been mass confusion. When was John writing about what is

now history? When was John making predictions about the future? What do the code words mean? It seems as if no two Biblical scholars can agree. The one thing that the scholars do agree on however is that John most firmly believed that there is in fact a life yet to come, and that he was attempting to describe it. I like the way the well-known preacher, William Willimon sums up the theme of John's Book of Revelation which includes today's passage.

“Revelation's emphasis is upon the ‘myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands’. A huge crowd is gathered before the throne, a massive, constantly processing choir made up not only of myriads of people, but even ‘of every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea.’

Surely we are meant to see in this vision at the end of the Bible a completion of God's work that begins in Genesis 1. ‘Every creature’ is caught up in the re-creation. Our post-Genesis situation has been fixed. One day, there before the throne, we shall take our places among the myriads of myriads, with the hump back whales and bull-finches, the wolves and the lemurs, with those whom we have loved (and, presumably, with those whom we have despised), all singing with one voice, ‘Blessing and honour and glory and might to the Lamb!’ ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!’”

Salvation; this in a nutshell is what today, this day after Halloween, is all about. Today we remember and affirm not only our destiny but that of the entire creation itself. God's salvation, achieved through Christ, is for everyone and everything. Ultimately all shall be well for salvation belongs to God. Salvation; both ours and that of the creation and all therein is our destiny. It is simply because in the end God is going to get what God has wanted from the very beginning.