

Last weekend I was asked by a disgruntled five year old granddaughter why I wasn't celebrating Halloween. For her it is all about fun, sweets, parties, pumpkins and dressing up in scary costumes. For me, I lament the commerciality of it all ("Happy Halloween banners??"); more so the obscuring of the real meaning of All Hallows Eve, a time for reflection and remembrance of those who have died.

The celebration of Halloween on October 31st probably has its origins in the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, marking the transition from autumn to winter. It was traditionally the time when, as the days got shorter, the nights colder and darkness longer, it was thought that ghosts would walk abroad and revisit their old homes to warm themselves by the fire and enjoy the company of their (living) relatives. The Celts also thought that hobgoblins and witches on broom sticks with black cats would be abroad at Halloween. People would light bonfires outside to ward them off and if they had to venture out, they would wear masks to disguise themselves to avoid being recognised by wandering spirits.

As Christianity spread across Europe, religious practices replaced these old ways. Pope Gregory III (731-741) named November 1st as All Saints Day, a day to commemorate all saints and Christian martyrs. The evening before became known as All Hallows Eve or Halloween. Churches today offer children alternative Halloween celebrations with "Light Parties" to counteract the emphasis on fake skeletons, witches and spooky cobwebs that all have their roots in the Celtic Samhain festival.

"Trick or treating" can be traced back to early English practices, although the Americans have helped to develop it into its present popular activity. Formerly people would place bowls of food outside their homes to prevent the ghosts of the dead from coming inside. The church replaced this ancient practice with a new idea. Families were encouraged to give food –"soul cakes" – to the poor in return for their promise to pray for the family's dead relatives. This evolved into "trick or treating" where children would visit local homes and be given sweets or perhaps money.

There are some traditions associated with Halloween that have been more or less forgotten (but see below!) including rituals focusing on the future, especially the romantic foretelling of who might be your husband, or wife, before next Halloween. In Scotland for example, a young lady might name a hazelnut for each of her many suitors and on throwing them into the fire, the one that burned to ashes without exploding would be her future husband.

Intriguingly, I recognised one such tradition as something my friends and I used to do as young children at primary school, although as far as I remember (it was a long time ago!) it was not associated with Halloween. That is, the tradition of tossing an apple peel over your shoulder and seeing what initial the peel formed when it fell on

the floor. That initial would indicate the name of the man you would marry. Interesting that this game was a survivor from a much earlier time and tradition.

We did take our granddaughters to pick pumpkins – why pumpkins at Halloween? – that’s another story! (<https://www.britannica.com/story/why-do-we-carve-pumpkins-at-halloween>).

See also : “The Golden Bough – a study in magic and religion” J.G. Frazier; <https://www.history.com/topics/history-of-halloween>.

Rev Claire Hargreaves



Good News/Mission Resources

Have you ever thought about the connections between a good hairdresser and the Church? No? Then have a watch of this short video about a new piece of Pioneer Project work being done by ex-Army Chaplain and green beret, Darren Middleton sponsored by the Methodist Church New Places/New People initiative -

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpjDu4Yfp_M

Ask yourself - what new thing might I do to create community and get a conversation going?