All Saints 2021, 8.30am BCP Holy Communion

It is a very strange thing that what survives of this great feast is, for most people, aisles and aisles of plastic ghouls and ghosts and very suspiciously coloured factory-made sugary things. Halloween, as you know, is actually the survivor of All Hallows’ Eve. You can see how, over time, the words get shifted from one to the other: All Hallows Eve to Halloween.

All Hallows means All Saints. All Hallows Eve is the Evening before All Saints. So it is today, because tomorrow is 1st November, the feast of All Saints. The next day, Tuesday the 2nd, is All Souls.

The start of November each year is a wonderful invitation for the church to celebrate with the Saints on the first, and, on the second, pray for our loved ones who have died. We go into November, not humming Christmas songs far too early, or knocking on doors trying to pppppp... pick up a penguin from some strangers ‘trick or treat’-ready biscuit tin, but thanks to All Saints and All Souls, the 1st and 2nd of November, with heaven fixed in our sights.

Wouldn’t you rather have an eternal vista, hope of heaven, and loving remembrance of loved ones departed each year commended to the mercy of God, than a scream mask, or so spray on cobwebs...?

Really, I don’t mind Halloween. I don’t think its particularly evil, I just think it’s naff. More plastic made, more money put in the pocket of American supermarket giants who desperately keep this nonsense afloat for their own good.
But we’ve got ahead of ourselves already. All Hallows Eve. As you know we actually keep the eve of many other things too. Christmas Eve is the most famous. But Easter Eve too. Every major feast begins the night before. Every Sunday – which is a mini Easter – begins with sundown on the Saturday night. Evening Prayer is said, and the next day begins. Why? Because we’re Christian, and like our Jewish forebears the day begins with nightfall. Sabbath begins on Friday night with dinner. So it is for us too. The night before is the beginning: Saturday night is Sunday, Christmas Eve is Christmas. Halloween is All Saints Day.

So what is All Saints Day?
It is the day of the year when we celebrate the great throng, the triumphal procession, the heaving party that awaits us in heaven. Saints are those who we have (over the centuries and in our own time) seen the light of Christ shining in so brightly, that we are confident that they are already there. They’ve made it, and we rejoice with them, thank them for their continued help and prayers, and share inspiration from their lives. Which is your favourite Saint and why? If you haven’t got one, find some in churches near you, in the paintings of the National Gallery, google and find their stories!

All Saints Day is kept today, transferred as it can be from 1st November to the nearest Sunday. On 2nd November we will gather again. The Eucharist will be offered as it is every Tuesday at 7.40am – our 20 minute ‘commuter’ service, and 6pm. All Souls Day is the day of the dead. We remember those who have died in the last year, and all we love who have died, and commend them home to God. It is with the same confidence with which we celebrate the saints that we commend our brothers and sisters home to God the day after.
Clearly these feasts also raise questions. I’ll end by just unfolding that a little. Two things to say about what happens when we die. On All Souls Day we read the names of the dead. As we pray for them, where do we think they are? What are they up to? Well, one of the pickles that people have got themselves into over the years is to imagine that what happens after we die can be systematised, or categorised in time; it can’t. When we die, we leave time and space. It can’t be x number of days in this antechamber, or y number of days in that celestial zone. There is no time, no space. That’s just us on this side of death trying impose our way of understanding the world on a world beyond our own. Eternity is held in God – complete, eternal presence. Not time stretched out, just the eternal now.

But, life is a journey, and there is no reason to assume that when we die we shall be ready to arrive in the company of the Saints. A wonderfully wise old lady in my last parish used to say, ‘I don’t pretend that I’m ready for heaven, Father, I’m sure there’s some more buffing up and sorting out to be done, and all for the good’.

But whatever the journey home on this side of death or the other will actually entail… here’s the main thing. When we die is not a ‘what’ at all. The Bible gives us lots of different images to help us, but they are only images. It isn’t a place, or harps and clouds, it isn’t a ‘what’ and it isn’t a ‘where’. That again is us human beings trying to understand something that is truly beyond our ken. When we die is not a ‘what’ or a ‘where’, it is a ‘who’, it is a person. When we die it isn’t clouds and harps we have to hope for, it isn’t a serious of Herculean tasks or a celestial car-wash we have to grin and bear, it isn’t anything; it is not death that meets us, but Jesus. It is a person: God. God who loved us enough to die for us. And that (unlike any of our flawed imaginings) is truly good news. And something worth hoping for and celebrating in these holy days at the start of November.