

Q. What is All Saints' Day? All Souls'? Are they the same thing?

There are a couple of ways of understanding the word 'saint', and the church has seen some evolution in the way All Saints' Day and All Souls' is understood and celebrated. In the more traditional sense, the 'saints' of the church are those whose lives are seen as having so witnessed to the love of God and the faith of the church that they reveal a particular, widely-recognizable closeness to God, both in their lives, and even after their deaths. We also use the term 'the saints' in a more all-encompassing way, referring to those many brothers and sisters who walk the life of faith, who share in God's life both before and after death, and yet who do this in the more ordinary, everyday, flawed, but no less beautiful way we see all around us.

Although many of the more prominent saints had specific Feast Days on which to celebrate and remember their lives, it eventually became important to have a 'catch all' holiday to honour them within the contribution that their lives as a group, a communion, make. November 1st was traditionally All Saints' Day, with All Souls' celebrated the day after. All Souls', in many parts of the world, became the bigger of the two festivals, as this was a time for honouring the family and friends of individuals in a faith community who had died. The church taught that, for most ordinary people, heaven would not be an immediate reality. The purification of purgatory must be endured for an appropriate amount of time before an ordinary, flawed person would be ready to make that next step into God's heavenly graces.

Purgatory is not a part of our Anglican teaching. We remember and pray for our loved ones, not because we want to get them out of purgatory, but because we understand that they remain an important part of our lives, even after they have died. This is a fundamental principle which is at the heart of our worship today, just as it was 1400 years ago. Many of us have experienced – some in very concrete, or some in deeply intuitive, ways -- that those who have died continue to be present to us. For all of us, it is an affirmation that we make regularly in our practices and in our worship: our lives are of deep value to God, our lives hold the possibility of participating in God's life and truth, our lives are joined in Christ's resurrection, and death does not destroy us. Now the celebration of All Saints' and All Souls' is often rolled into one all-embracing worship observance, and we mark this day in the church year on the Sunday closest to November 1st.

Our worship today honours the range of emotions present in the beliefs we profess. It begins on a celebratory and triumphant note. We give thanks for the courage, love and faith of our saints: this is praise for the God who is continually working in and through ordinary human beings in order to communicate with us. Our worship also has a solemn note, remembering those who are close to us who have died in this past year. No matter how certain a person is in their faith, losing a loved one is devastating, grief can be overwhelming, even crippling, time and space and support is needed to walk through the grieving and healing process.

And within that recognition, we celebrate the sacrament of Eucharist, gathering at God's table to receive God's good gifts to us once again. We receive those gifts and perhaps we

experience the thinness of the veil between this world and the next: God gathers us and all of the faithful before and after us into the eternal song of heaven, into the vast and enduring promise of God's love working in and through us, walking beside us on our journey.