



NOV./DEC. FAITH COLUMNS

Christian All Saints and All Souls Days



We are increasingly aware of children knocking on our door on Hallowe'en, Oct 31st, and greeting us with 'trick or treat', meaning that we must give them a treat, such as a sweet, biscuit or cake. If we don't then they may play a trick on us. Some families may shape a devil's face from a pumpkin or turnip and put a candle inside to light it up. Also we may see people on their way to Hallowe'en parties, dressed in the traditional witches' black cloak and pointed hat.

Hallowe'en, the eve of All Saints Day, is a contraction of All Hallows (holy) Eve. In pre-Christian Britain 31st Oct was the eve of the New Year, when the souls of the dead were thought to revisit their homes. After it became a Christian festival, supernatural customs continued.

All Saints' Day is now celebrated on Nov 1st and All Souls' Day on Nov 2nd, mainly by Catholic and Anglican Christians. Christians attend church services on All Saints' Day to remember all of the saints and martyrs throughout history, who gave their lives for their faith. Many churches celebrate a Requiem Mass or Eucharist on All Souls' Day, when the names of people who have died in the last year are read out and remembered.

Initially there was no established procedure for authorising who should be recognised as saints; hence the Virgin Mary, the apostles and evangelists were easily recognised as saints by common consent. Later the formal system of canonisation was introduced by the Catholic Church, involving a formal inquiry into the candidate's life. The main criteria for sainthood is not just having visions, such as St Bernadette of Lourdes, or carrying out 'miracle cures', but living a life of Christian faithfulness and integrity, often against severe opposition, and sometimes violent death, such as St Laurence, who was allegedly roasted on a grid-iron.

Many Christian churches are dedicated to a particular saint and have an annual festival day when the congregation celebrate the life of that saint. Cathedrals may also have chapels dedicated to particular saints and many people gain great comfort in praying to God using a favourite saint as an intercessor on their behalf.

Many countries have patron saints and have celebrations on that saint's dedicated day. The Irish, wherever they have travelled to worldwide have great festivities on St Patrick's Day. The Welsh celebrate St David's Day, the Scottish St Andrew's Day and the English St Georges' Day. Schools, streets and railway stations, such as St Pancras in London, are frequently named after saints because of their location near a church dedicated to a saint. Hospitals such as St Bartholomew's and Hospices such as St Luke's carry saints' names because of their Christian heritage and their association with charitable work.

So the next time we come across a saint's day, walk down a street or visit a hospital dedicated to a saint, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the story behind the name?

***Peter Rookes** is BCF's Third Sector Liaison Officer and has recently been elected onto the board of Birmingham Voluntary Services Council.*

The Sikh Scriptures

*Guru Granth Ji maniyo, pargat guraa(n) kee deh...
Ja ka hirdaa shud hai, khoj shabad mai leh’.*



THESE lines, which are sung at the end of the Ardas, are a constant reminder that our Scripture is more than a sacred volume or text. For Sikhs, it is Guru, and whenever we are in its presence, we should feel that the human Gurus themselves are enthroned before us. Like the mortal Gurus, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is capable of guiding us, loving us and blessing us.

One could say that as well as being the ‘Living Word’ of the Gurus and enlightened souls from different traditions, the Sacred Scripture is in fact the ‘Living Voice’. This is because it is shared, transmitted, memorized and internalized, mainly through oral recitation (*paath*) but also through spiritual song (*kirtan*). Gradually, recitation and singing lead to a continuous internal remembrance of the Lord. Guru Nanak Dev Ji prays that no matter how much progress one makes, be it on the material or spiritual path, we should keep our ego at bay and never forget our Creator. This is expressed very movingly in the following verse:

‘If I were to become an emperor, and raise a huge army, and sit on my royal throne, issuing commands and collecting taxes...Remember, O Nanak, all this will pass like a puff of wind. In the midst of such mighty rule, how easily I could stray and forget You, and Your Name would just slip from my mind.’ (Guru Nanak Dev Ji, SGGS, p14).

Guru Granth Sahib Ji tells us that we are here for a purpose, and that human life is an opportunity to kindle the Divine spark infused in us by the Almighty.

‘We came into this world to hear and recite the sacred words of spiritual teaching. But forgetting the Divine Name, we become consumed by other distractions, and this precious life of ours loses its true worth.’ (Guru Arjan Dev Ji, SGGS, p1219).

To build a relationship with any human being, we need more than intellect and reason – our attitude, outlook and the love in our heart counts a lot. Likewise, although our intellect might help us understand the teaching to a certain level, to grasp its essence requires a heart that is free from the grip of ego. It is then that its treasures really begin to shine and we become touched and transformed by the radiance of our sacred Guru and Scripture.

Sewa Singh Mandla is a solicitor who came to this country from Kenya. He is this year’s Chair of Birmingham Faith Forum and a devotee at the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha

What We Have in Common



Those who belong to the faiths of Indian origin have much in common and it is always good to remember our religious kinship. Both Guru Nanak and the Buddha reminded us that the human race is one family. Their followers, however, have a closer kinship than cousins. We are brothers and have many other spiritual teachings in common.

The holy teachers have said that by listening to the words of the Guru Granth Sahib “pain and sin are erased”. It is also said that by listening one intuitively grasps the essence of meditation and that by so doing the faithful find the door of liberation.

Similarly to Guru Gobind Singh, as the Buddha was near his death over 2550 years ago, He taught that after His passing away his followers should keep His teachings as the guide to liberation. “Listen, bear it in mind and put it into practice”, the Buddha said. But listening is only the start; the teaching must also be kept in the listening person’s heart and acted upon.

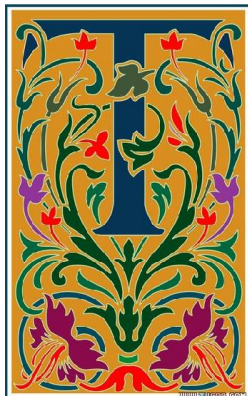
In the Guru Granth it is said, Remember God, work hard and share food. In the same way, the Buddha said we must develop ourselves spiritually for the good of many others in society. Right Effort is one of the key factors in the Buddhist eight-fold path. As Sikhs are asked to share food with others, it is said in the Buddhist scriptures that before you preach you have to feed the listener first. The hungry man has his mind on other things and it is important that his wants are addressed.

Not only is it a Buddhist duty to serve those in need, but we have the responsibility of protecting the environment as well. One of our fundamental meditations is the development of loving kindness that encompasses the entire world, not just all beings but everything on the planet. The need for this practice is greater in these times when the future of the entire world is threatened. How can we have allowed the earth, the air and the sea to become so polluted that all life is at risk?

These thoughts occurred to me when I spoke at the celebration of the tercentenary of the Sikh scriptures last week that was organised, among others, by the editor of the *Sikh Times*. Looking at the multi faith audience present then, I thought of our common endeavour and motivation as people of faith. We believe that faith in action proceeds from certain premises which are not necessarily shared by the secular world or by politically motivated people. People of faith testify to the transformational power of faith-driven social regeneration. We believe that much of the tension between our ethnic groups stems from ignorance and misunderstanding of each other’s backgrounds, beliefs and cultural formation and so we seek occasions such as last week’s celebrations as a safe meeting place where diversity is seen, not as an uncomfortable liability, but as a welcome asset.

Ven. W. Kassapa is head of the Birmingham Buddhist Maha Vihara in Hockley. Of Sri Lankan origin, he arrived in the city in 1985 and received an OBE at the start of this year for his charitable work.

The meaning of Advent for Christians



THE Christian year begins, not on January 1st, but with the season of Advent, which is kept throughout December. Advent should be a time of serious preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, born as a vulnerable human baby into an ordinary human family. The word 'Christ' comes from the Greek word meaning 'anointed' or chosen by God. However, these days most Christians get caught up with everyone else into looking forward to the festival of Christmas, so Advent becomes a time of cooking and decorating, sending cards and buying gifts, and maybe opening the 24 little doors on an Advent calendar, which lead to December 25th. It's an especially exciting time for children, although they easily mix up the secular rituals of Santa Claus, Christmas trees and parties with the Christian story of the birth of Jesus or nativity, celebrated widely in primary school nativity plays during Advent.

In many churches Christians make an Advent wreath of greenery decorated with five candles. Four of the candles represent four aspects of preparation for Jesus Christ: the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. They are lit on each of the four Sundays of December, while the fifth one, representing Jesus, is lit on Christmas day itself. The patriarchs include Abraham and David, Hebrew figures common to Jews and Muslims as well as Christians. The prophets are those in the Hebrew story who foretold the birth of a 'Messiah' or Saviour. John the Baptist was the one who proclaimed the coming of Jesus and Mary was chosen by God to be his mother.

Preparation is not the only theme remembered during Advent. It is a time when Christians are most conscious of the powers of darkness and evil in the world and they pray for the 'light of Christ' to come. They pray not only for light in their own personal lives, but also for the poor, suffering and oppressed people of the world. Services are often held by candlelight, particularly atmospheric in this part of the world, where nights are long and cold in the Advent season. It is a time of longing for God to come and transform the world, in the knowledge that this coming may expose our own shortcomings. So it is a time of penitence and self examination, just as it is in Lent, the time of preparation for Easter.

For me and many other women, Advent is my favourite season of the Christian calendar particularly because it is about waiting for the right time. This waiting is a time of darkness and of prayer as well as of anticipation and promise. Women who have sat by the bedsides of the sick, or awaited the birth of a child, know this deep meaning of Advent. They feel the suffering of the world as well as of their loved ones, and also know what it is to prepare for a new beginning.

Ruth Tetlow is one of the Christian representatives of BCF. She has recently moved to Moseley and is Co-ordinator of the Faith Encounter Project.