The feasts of All Saints and All Souls

All Saints Day is an ancient feast going back to the very early days of the Christianity. It began with the tradition of celebrating the martyrdom of saints on the anniversary of their martyrdom. During the persecutions of the late Roman Empire the number of martyrs increased greatly and to ensure none were neglected, local dioceses instituted a common feast day. This enabled them to commemorate the lives and deaths of every-one undergoing martyrdom. It was common throughout the East by the late fourth century and early on it was understood to be a celebration of not only the martyrs but of all saints – known and unknown.

The Day of the Dead – Día de los Muertos

Day of the Dead, Spanish Día de los Muertos, is a holiday in Mexico set aside for honouring dead loved ones and making peace with the eventuality of death by treating it familiarly, without fear and dread. As it is with so many Christian festivities its rituals go back to the practices of the traditional peoples of Mexico to the goddess Mictecacihuatl - known as “Lady of the Dead.”. With the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico the process of converting the native peoples to Roman Catholicism began and these celebrations were moved to coincide with All Saints’ Day and All Souls.

Modern observances vary so that in some rural areas, families adorn grave sites with candles, marigolds, and the favourite foods of deceased relatives. The feast is more about persuading the deceased loved ones to return for a family reunion. In urban areas, people take to the street for festive celebrations with a great deal of eating and drinking. Some wear wooden skull masks known as calacas. Many families build altars, called ofrendas, in their homes, using photos, candles, flowers, and food. It can all seem a little strange from our Australian perspective but the black humour central to these activities is about helping people to come to face the reality of death. It is not something to be feared but an inevitability that should not be celebrated. This is why the people use and food, breads, sugar, toys and candies that are created in the shape of symbols of death such as skulls and skeletons. What a wonderful approach to the reality of death – look Her in the eye and laugh! They mock death for all of its apparent power. What seems to be the end is but a new beginning, a new existence according to the original plan of God. This is the true meaning of euthanasia – a happy death. The only thing making death a happy event is God. Without God, Death wins. With God, Death is reduced to but a moment in a person’s life, a step forward in their existence. We share a common life in Christ whether we are alive or dead and therein is our hope.

We pray with, for and to the dead

We know from ancient writings how the early believers were urged to pray for those who have died – e.g. Tertullian (A.D. 216) we offer sacrifices for the dead on their birthday anniversaries. He is referring here to their birthday as being the day of their birth to eternal life. Within Judaism there
was – and still is today – a tradition of praying for the dead. They have a prayer called the Mourners’s Kaddish. For what are we praying? We are asking the faithful dead to present us before the throne of God. We pray them saying “thanks” for being divine gifts in our lives. We join our prayers of praise and thanksgiving with theirs as the whole Communion of Saints gathers together. We present them to God and pray for divine mercy on their souls. That is, we continue to entrust them to God as a part of our own journeys of hope.

**Alive or dead we share life in Christ as the Communion of Saints**

Judaism and Christianity share a common understanding of the importance of engaging with those who have died and now rest in peace. Death is not the end. For the believer, life is over but it is not ended. This is why, from the earliest days Christians have turned their prayers towards heaven. We have been praying for the members of the Church who have died but men and women with whom we are still in communion (the Communion of Saints). This is a consequence of our union in Jesus Christ who rose from the grave. It is through Him this connection – communion – is created and maintained. It is because of his resurrection that we are able to understand something of the sad and often tragic reality of death. In our dying we are, through faith, caught up in the same resurrection experience by Jesus. The Body of Christ is not just a reality for those who are alive on this earth. The living and the dead live in Christ, now and forever. This is our hope…that all will be made alive in Christ. The final victory of Jesus will be His ending of the power of death…as St Paul proclaims: the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

**Embracing Death as we embrace a loved family member**

Why do we celebrate the feast of All Saints and All Souls and why is it so important in today’s very materialistic world? We can go back to St Paul for an answer to this…When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ St Francis of Assisi sang the praises of Sister Death, a reality to be embraced by all followers of Christ. For him, death is not something that just happens and brings life to an end. It is a gift to be embraced as one would embrace a favoured sister. He thanked God for the gift of a happy death and by that he means a death experienced in the midst of Gospel living. Those who die this way will die happy…Happy those she finds doing your will! The second death can do them no harm. He would be amused at the lengths people go to in our Western world to avoid even the word death. People do not die, they pass, pass on, pass away, go from us. They are taken, asleep, resting, at peace, cut down, crossed over, fallen, bit the dust, croaked, gone, kicked the bucket, etc, etc. There is even a website that boasts of having some 200+ euphemisms for death! They are all about trying to ease the deep pain, sorrow and sadness that is inevitably associated with the death of someone we know and love. But without a spiritual understanding of death, it is difficult to find a way of coming to terms with the dark sorrow we experience. For the believer, knowing how we share in Christ’s resurrection, that even in death we remain a part of the Communion of Saints, the Body of Christ, death is but one more step on our journey to eternity. Death is never meaningless, never a “waste” and while it will fill us with sorrow, we know our separation from our loved ones is but temporary. They are with Christ in a way we do not fully understand but in a manner we will one day share with them.

Thus, this feast is to be celebrated with great joy. We remember with love those who have died, who have gone before us marked by faith. We join with them, the known and the unknown in giving praise to God and beseech them to pray for us as we continue our pilgrimages here on earth.

**Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ –**

anathoth.hough@gmail.com  -  www.houghongod.com