

31st October 2020

Halloween

“I saw a stranger yestere’en. I put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place, music in the listening place. In the name of the sacred Triune, the stranger blessed me and my house, my cattle and my dear ones. And the lark said in her song, ‘Often, often, often, goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise. Often, often, often, goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.’”

A Celtic Rune of Hospitality

Tonight is Halloween, the time, in American parlance, for children to go out “Trick or Treating”. However, I’m still steeped in the Halloweens of my childhood in Scotland when we went out “guising”. This consisted of children going from door to door in disguise – often with elaborate costumes. Each child was expected to offer a “performance” in the form of a poem, song, or joke, and, in return, they would receive a gift in the form of food, usually apples or nuts. Though Covid-19 restrictions make such things difficult, if not impossible, this year, my memories are happy ones.

The “guising” tradition goes back a long way and was first recorded in Scotland in the 16th century. A more “contemporary” reference comes from 1895 where masqueraders in disguise and carrying lanterns made of scooped-out turnips visited homes to be rewarded with cakes and fruit. In my childhood, enterprising children would already know the generous homes from past years and head there first, so they could be suitably rewarded before then less well-informed children came along.

I loved guising at Halloween when I was a child. These were safe days in a small village. And it was about community, fun, kindness, generosity, affection, warmth and, above all, welcome and hospitality.

Perhaps it’s a fanciful thought, but I wonder if “guising” might be rooted somewhere in the concept of hospitality as outlined in the Celtic Rune with which this Thought for the Day begins. Poor children being provided for? Need being rewarded with kindness? Communities caring for their own? I hope so. For you never know, if Christ *does* go about “in a stranger’s guise” as the Rune suggests, then that little child who appeared on your doorstep at Halloween and sang a well-rehearsed song, might just have been the Christ who was hoping to be welcomed into your home.

A prayer for today

Living God, may the stranger be my friend; may Christ receive my welcome. Amen.

An original reflection ©Tom Gordon

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