

A Sermon for the Feast of All Saints, Given November 2, 2008

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“After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9-10).

Many people shy away from Revelation because it seems hard to understand, or because of the way some Bible teachers run amuck with it. But the closer we read it the more we will understand that it merely says, in a tapestry of images, the same things that are said in the rest of the Bible.

Two central themes of the Bible are judgment and redemption. God’s righteous judgment comes on the world because of sin, but God acts to save his chosen ones from that judgment. God judged the ancient world through the flood, but saved Noah and his family in the ark. God judged Egypt with various plagues, and the death of the first born, but saved his people through the blood of the lamb.

God judged his own people at the end of the Old Testament, but saved a faithful remnant. God judged Israel at the time of Jesus, but saved his church. As the Psalm says, “For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth.” (96:13). To be saved is, precisely, to be saved from the coming judgment.

That is what is happening in our lesson from Revelation chapter 7. In chapter 6, the judgments of God are unleashed, as Jesus, the lamb of God, opens the seals of God’s judgment scroll. All people, from kings to slaves, are heard to say, “The great day of [God’s] wrath has come and who is able to stand?” (6:17).

Chapter 7 provides the answer. John sees the 144,000 of the tribes of Israel, and then a multitude which no one can number, “standing” before the throne and before the Lamb. These have been “saved” from the wrath of God that is coming on the world. They are able to stand.

The redeemed are marked off from the rest of the world because they are “sealed” in their foreheads. This is a reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Ephesians says, “After you believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit” (1:13).

The 144,000 of Israel, which comes to include a large number of diverse peoples, is a picture of how, in Christ, the fullness of Israel has taken on another dimension. Through God’s mission to the Gentiles, Israel now includes a multitude of all nations, kindreds, people and tongues.

The question is asked in the lesson, “Who are these?” The answer given is, “These are they which came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Like most biblical prophecies, there are a couple of levels of interpretation. On one level, the great tribulation was the tribulation faced by the generation after the crucifixion in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem, as the age of the temple gave way to the new age of the church.

On another level, this great multitude includes the people of God in every age, who suffer and endure trial because they belong to God. To be tested is the vocation of God's people. As St. Paul said to his first converts, "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

The reward of those who are faithful is to be in God's presence and freed from the afflictions to which they were subjected in their trial.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

Thus, the great multitude are all the saints, whom we celebrate today. In the biblical sense, this includes all the departed faithful in Christ. For, while we give certain famous Christians the formal title "saint," the Bible makes no distinction between super Christians and the rest of us. All who belong to Christ and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit are saints.

The word saint means "holy one." The word holy means, "set apart." A saint is one who has been marked by God as being separate from the world and, thus, saved from the judgement that is coming. The more we reflect on this root meaning—that a saint is one who is set apart from the world—the more we will realize how silly it is for Christians to follow the morality and fashion of the world.

This was the great sin of Israel that brought God's judgment upon her. She adopted the practices of the pagan nations that surrounded her. As she adopted the pagan practices, she shared in God's judgment on those practices.

Those who have been set apart by God and given his Holy Spirit must be, in a sense, out of step with what is common in society. The world will say, "How can you expect modern people to do what the Bible says to do? A saint will say, "I am set apart from the world by God. I cannot do anything else."

We continually remember that "He shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead." As we gather around the altar of God, as we turn from sin and towards Christ, we take our place in that great redeemed fellowship of Revelation 7--those who have been set apart by God and saved from the coming judgment. Our participation in the Sacrament is a foretaste of the better things that God has prepared for us.

As we leave the altar, we remember that we are also called to be saints, to be set apart. We are called to live in a different way that bears witness to the world of a better life and better destiny.