

## **A Sermon for the Feast of All Saints, Given November 5, 2006**

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The lesson for the epistle from Revelation (7:2f.) is a little difficult to understand in the details—like many parts of Revelation. But it makes a point that can be easily understood, if we step back from the details to look at the big picture.

In the lesson, judgment is coming through four angels who have been given authority to hurt the earth and the sea. But these angels are told not to begin the judgment until the servants of God have been marked or sealed on the foreheads. Clearly, they are sealed so as to be saved from the coming judgment.

This is an illustration of our salvation. By faith we are saved. Saved from what? According to the Bible, we are saved from the judgment that is coming on the earth. As Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

But the elect are marked out not only to be saved from judgment; the elect are also set apart to live in a new way with a new destiny. At the end of our lesson, we see the redeemed in the presence of God. They are described as those "which came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb."

The great tribulation refers to the great suffering they endured for their faith—which included martyrdom. The washing of their robes refers to the purification of their hearts and minds from sin through confession, faith in Jesus Christ and the baptismal gift of the Spirit.

They faithfully endured the tribulation and now they live forever in the presence of God. "They hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; 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."

We are today celebrating the feast of All Saints. The lesson gives a summary of the vocation of a saint. A saint is one who is chosen and marked by God as belonging to him and not subject to judgment. A saint is one who faithfully endures trial. And a saint is one whose reward is to live in the very presence of God.

The feast of All Saints is about anonymous saints. The famous saints, the apostles, St. Augustine, St. Francis, and such, have their own days. But the church has always recognized that there are many others—as the lesson says, "multitudes, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds and peoples and tongues," who lived faithful and holy lives in service to Christ.

All Saints teaches us that holiness is not just a vocation for really famous Christians. In fact, the Bible doesn't make a distinction between Christians who are saints and other types of Christians. When St. Paul addressed 1 Corinthians to "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints," he was referring to the vocation of each and every member of the church.

Often, Christians will say things like, "I am no saint." By definition, this is not true. The word saint

means, literally, “holy one.” The word holy means literally, “set apart.” God sets us apart when he gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism. This is the seal on the forehead to which Revelation refers. We are holy, we are viewed by God as saints, because we have the Holy Spirit.

The Christian life is about living in the light of this new identity, becoming in reality what God has declared us to be. Often the Christian life is understood only in terms of salvation from judgment—a sort of insurance policy against hell. However, not one of us will be ready to live in God’s presence until we have become saints, until we have fulfilled our baptismal identity.

Those to whom we give the title “saint” are those who have progressed a bit further in the way. They give us a pattern of “virtuous and godly living” to follow. The world teaches us haste. The saints teach us patience. The world offers short cuts. The saints teach us to persevere in obedience and wait for the promise of God. The world tells us to follow where our desires lead. The saints teach us to purify our desires and redirect them towards God. The world makes moral decisions on the basis of economic analysis and opinion polls. But the saints realize that not everything that makes money is good; not every action that 51% of the people favor is moral.

Contrary to popular caricature, saints are not always “nice.” Niceness is a cultural rather than a biblical virtue. The concern of holiness for the will of God often causes confrontation. Elijah confronts Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal; Jeremiah opposes the popular but disobedient policy of the king; Jesus confronts Israel with her sin. And they suffer exile, imprisonment and crucifixion.

What the church and the world need more than anything else are Christians who will commit themselves to prayer and the pursuit of holiness. People often ask what they can do to help the church. The primary thing each member can contribute to the body of Christ is to be faithful in the ordinary things of the Christian life.

Persevere in your spiritual disciplines. Live the life of prayer. Worship God with devotion and sincerity. Examine your motives. Make good and honest confessions. Accept the promise of forgiveness. Live new lives. Stand up for the truth. Pray for those in need. Be a faithful steward of all that God has given you. Make a sincere effort to practice love, to seek the good of others—especially to love those whom you do not like very much.

On the Feast of All Saints, we remember the many people who lived holy lives in ordinary circumstances and who remind us that it is our vocation to do the same. As Hebrews says, “Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (12:14).