



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for All Saints' Sunday

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

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November 6, 2011 — All Saints

There's a close connection that naturally exists between Reformation Sunday and the Feast of All Saints that we celebrate today. Reformation Day, which we celebrated last Sunday, commemorates Martin Luther nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the church door in Wittenburg, but the reason Luther was so angry—angry enough to risk not only his career, but eventually to risk his own life—had to do with a corruption of the Gospel that was driven home to him and to the people in his care every November 1st, All Saints' Day.

You'll remember that last week I talked about Luther's prince, Frederick the Wise, who in his simple and sincere piety and thanks to his great wealth had amassed a *huge* collection of more than 19,000 relics of the saints. He collected those relics because the Church had told him that those relics would help to save him and help to save the people who would pay money to see them every year on All Saints' Day. Luther was angry that on the very day when the Church was to commemorate the "saints"—those saints on earth and especially those saints in heaven who have been washed in the blood of the lamb and now stand in the presence of God *solely* on the merits of Jesus Christ; on the day when the unadulterated Gospel, when the merits of the blood of the lamb, should have been set before the people to give them hope, the Church was *instead* telling them that they could buy their way into heaven by purchasing the merit of those very saints who were already in heaven on the merit of Christ alone! Reformation Day isn't just about an angry Martin Luther. As I said last week, it's a day that calls the Church—and that means all of us—to the constant work of reformation, that calls us to the constant work of proclaiming the pure and unadulterated

Gospel of Jesus Christ: the message that men and women are sinners, that we are enemies of a just and holy God, that even our smallest sins are treason against our loving Creator, that we all stand condemned to eternal damnation, but that in his love the Father sent his Son in the person of Jesus Christ to die the death we deserved, to pay the penalty of our sins, and to rise again victorious over sin and death, that all those who trust by faith in his sacrifice will be freed from sin and death and be restored to full and everlasting fellowship with God.

That message is what we celebrated last Sunday evening as we gathered for "Praise and Prayer". One of the new songs we learned has stuck in my head all week:

*The mystery of the cross I cannot
comprehend
The agonies of Calvary
You the perfect Holy One crushed Your
Son
Who drank the bitter cup reserved for
me*

*By Your perfect sacrifice I've been
brought near
Your enemy You've made Your friend
Pouring out the riches of Your glorious
grace
Your mercy and Your kindness know no
end*

And in the chorus we sang:

*Your blood has washed away my sin
Jesus, thank You
The Father's wrath completely satisfied
Jesus, thank You
Once Your enemy, now seated at Your
table
Jesus, thank You*

Brothers and sisters, that's the Gospel. That's what Luther stood for. That's what the reformers in our own Anglican tradition stood for. It's what men and women from the time of the apostles have stood for and it's what we have to stand for if we are to be faithful to our Lord and if we are to fulfil the mission he's given us.

But taking a stand for the Gospel isn't always an easy thing to do. Luther was

forced into hiding because the Pope put a price on his head. In England, when Queen Mary came to the throne she tried to undo the work of the reformers, and bishops like Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer and a host of other men who had taken a stand for the Gospel were burned alive. Today in places like China and Somalia men and women are still martyred for their stand for the Gospel. But one of the most intense times of persecution the Church ever knew took place in the middle of the first century. The book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament was written to give comfort to those early Christians who had been experiencing the intense persecution of the Jews for decades and were about to face the even more horrible persecution of the Romans in a few short years. God gave St. John this vision of the saints, victorious and at rest, in heaven *to strengthen the saints here on earth as they faced persecution*—and because that vision gave them hope, *it should give us hope as we stand for the Gospel ourselves.*

Look with me at our Epistle in Revelation 7. In the text leading up to Chapter 7, John had seen God on his heavenly throne and before the throne were twenty-four elders, representing the Church. Twelve representing the twelve patriarchs—Jacob's sons and the chiefs of the tribes of Israel—and twelve representing the apostles—all them falling down in worship and adoration before the One who sat on the throne. In the midst of them stood the Lamb—stood Jesus—who took a book sealed with seven seals. In the book were the counsels of God in regard to humanity and we see the Lamb opening the first six seals and we read what happened as each was opened. The first Christians to whom John wrote about his vision would have seen the events and persecutions they'd been experiencing revealed in those six seals. But before the seventh and final seal was opened, before God's final acts, John saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, ready to let loose God's final judgement. That's when John saw another angel calling out to them not to let destruction loose yet—not, he says, "until we have sealed the servants of God on their foreheads." And John says

he “heard the number of the sealed, 144,000...from every tribe of the sons of Israel.”

The number isn't meant to be taken literally. Revelation is full of symbols and the numbers have significance in that respect. Twelve times twelve is completeness multiplied by completeness and a thousand represents greatness, so what John saw there was that the sealed of God was on the Church—all those believers who were about to face the coming persecution of the Romans. John's vision gave them hope; they were sealed by God and marked as his own. He would take care of them; God's care is complete and unailing. There are no cracks to fall through. But there's more to the vision. John goes on in verse 7:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:7-14

“These are the ones who have trusted in the sacrifice of Jesus at the cross. These are the ones who have refused to bow the knee to Caesar and to false gods. These are the ones who have refused to compromise the message of the Gospel.

They have suffered tribulation for their stand, but now they stand before their Lord and know that their faith was never wrong, never misplaced.”

Now, think about this. Just before Silas was baptised this morning, we sang those same words: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.” How many of you knew that those words came right from today's Epistle? As we sang those words, I wonder how many of us were really thinking about their significance. How often do we sing songs like that, with our hearts and minds in neutral? Singing God's praise, but distracted by what's for lunch, or by people outside the window, by a crooked banner or by the priest who forgot to put his stole on? How often do we talk or sing about the love of God and yet we really don't feel like we understand the love of God—or his salvation or his care or his promises? A few weeks ago we read St. Paul's prayer that the Ephesians might “comprehend...what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” I don't think even St. Paul could fully grasp the breadth and length and height of Jesus' love. And yet in John's vision of the saints in heaven we see men and women standing before God, having experienced the consummation of his promise of salvation. They're men and women who finally and really understand the depth of their sin and the even greater depth of God's love for them. They're men and women for whom all doubt has finally been removed. They're men and women for whom faith has become sight. And so they stand there singing praise to God in a way that we can only begin to understand. There are no distractions and when they sing, “Salvation belongs to our God,” they mean it in a way that only those finally in the presence of their Saviour can mean it. I have to say that I envy John's being allowed to see it. This is *true* worship in its *purest* form. Then elder tells John:

Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the

throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:15-17)

I've read a number of accounts of near death experiences and visions of heaven and what's always conspicuously absent is what John describes here: the worship of God before his throne day and night by the saints. Popular views of heavens have us being reunited with loved ones who have died, with old people being restored to youth, of people spending all day lounging in nature perfected, or our being confused with angels and growing wings and sitting around on clouds. I expect that a very few of those popular ideas have something to them, but the fact is that the Bible tells us very little about heaven. We tread on dangerous ground when we start painting pictures of heaven that are built on sources other than God's Word and when we start speculating about the things he has deliberately chosen not to reveal to us. But, brothers and sisters, what he *has* most definitely revealed to us is that heaven is a place of perfect worship as the redeemed live in the perpetual presence of their Redeemer, serving him and singing his praises day and night—never getting tired of worshipping God for the undeserved mercy he showed to sinners and finally knowing—really knowing— what is the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love.

This is the picture that St. John paints of the saints in *heaven*, for us, the saints on *earth*, as we slog through tribulation. What does it mean for us?

Let me say first: A lot of us have lost loved ones and we're still hurting from the loss. All Saints is often a time that reminds of those losses. Friends, as we read today's Epistle, let God wipe away the tears from your eyes as he reminds us that those who have died in his grace—those who have died trusting in

the saving work of Jesus at the cross— have had the tears wiped away from their eyes. They’ve been delivered from the great tribulation to live before the Lamb. We’re reminded that there’s no reason to mourn for them. All that’s left is for us to be reunited with them as death or the Lord’s return delivers us from the world’s tribulation.

But let me also say that as we come to the Lord’s Table today, he gratifies our desire to be with our loved ones. Think of all the people who come to visit their loved ones in the cemetery here. Brothers and sisters, if our loved ones died in the Lord, the place to be close to them isn’t the cemetery. Their physical coverings are buried out there, but if we desire communion with their real selves, the place to find it is at the Lord’s Table. The Holy Communion is the sacrament that links us to the saints in heaven.

The Epistle tells us that the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their Shepherd as he feeds them with the bread of heaven. This morning that same Lamb is truly present here, the Lamb of God, who gives us his heavenly food, his body and blood as we eat and drink the bread and wine— his very self.

The saints stand before the throne and the Lamb, praising God for the salvation he has given to them. The angels join in the song of praise and *we* join them too as we come to the heavenly banquet. We “give thanks to [him, our] Lord, [our] holy Father, mighty Creator, and eternal God...with angels and archangels, and with the whole company of heaven, we proclaim [his] great and glorious name, evermore praising [him] and singing...” That’s when we break forth into the song of heavenly praise: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord god of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Glory to you, O Lord most high.” Brothers and sisters, we don’t sing these praises alone. We sing them with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven— with the saints in glory.

We read that the saints have palm branches in their hands and sing: “Salvation belongs to our God.” And so today we greet our Lord as he comes to us in here at his Table and we sing those same words with them. They stand before the throne, clothed in white robes. They stand before God because they washed their sin-stained robes in the blood of the Lamb. We come too come to rejoice in our Saviour and, again as we do every week, to dip our robes in his shed blood. As he eat and drink in faith we declare: He gave his body for me. He shed his blood for me. My sins are washed away. I put on the righteousness of Christ that I might one day stand before the throne and before the Lamb. As we come we declare our faith in his sacrifice, we plead his promise of redemption, and we give him thanks and praise.

At the Table we stand with our loved ones who died in Christ and with the whole company of saints who have gone before us and with the whole family of God scattered around the earth. Imagine them all gathered around: Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Mary and Joseph, Peter and Paul, saints and martyrs from throughout history gathered around with us and with our loved ones— all of us together, those who have come out of the great tribulation and those of us who still slog through it day by day, dealing with our own struggles with sin, our own struggles to remain faithful, and our own persecutions. Here we have the assurance as he feeds us with himself, that he cares for us and *will* care for us for *all eternity*.

And so, dear friends, meditate on John’s vision of the saints in heaven as you come to the Table this morning. Keep it in mind as you leave today. And let it exhort, encourage, and give you strength to be always faithful to the Lord Jesus, always faithful to his Word, and always faithful to trust in, to live by, and to proclaim his Gospel message.

Let us pray: “Almighty God, who joined together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord, grant us grace

so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who sincerely love you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”