

11/01/20

All Saints Sunday

Thanks for the lives of His faithful ones

Rev. 7: 9-17

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes with palm branches in their hands,

and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!"

All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, Saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?"

And I said to him, "Sir, you know. So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

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 dwell among them.

They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat;

For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are reminded on this All Saints Sunday that it was on the eve of this church festival in the year 1517 that Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg some theses for debate which set in motion the events which we now call the Reformation. Luther's struggle for a return to Scripture as the basis for the Church's theology had ramifications also for this special Sunday in the liturgical year. In Luther's day, the term "saint" was reserved for those extraordinary heroes of the faith who, in the estimation of the church powers centered in Rome, had specially earned that title. It was one of Luther's profound and fully Scriptural insights that every believer in Christ is a "saint of God." That is how St. Paul addressed all the believers in Rome, in Corinth, in Ephesus, and in Philippi. All those who

put their trust in Christ Jesus are His saints—His “holy ones.” They are all represented in the picture drawn in our text of those dressed in the white robes of His perfect righteousness. And all who belong to Him by faith are the “blessed Ones” of whom Jesus speaks in that portion of His “Sermon on the Mount” which is today’s appointed Gospel.

There Jesus describes His saints both as they appear to the unbelieving world and also as He Himself regards them. The world sees them as lowly, as hungry and thirsty, as mourning, as persecuted. Our Lord sees the virtues which flow from their faith in Him—their mercy, their purity of spirit, their efforts to make peace. And because of their faith in Him by which they are dressed in the gleaming robes of His holiness, He pronounces them “blessed.”

In our text from St. John’s Book of Revelation, we see that “blessedness” fully revealed. Among those of whom the elder speaks are all the saints of Christ who have gone before us—including those whose names we have called and in whose memory we have lighted candles today. On this All Saints Sunday, we thank our Savior-God for including them in that holy band which is gathered around His throne, and we thank Him also for the blessing that they and all the saints of the Church have been to us.

I

In the heavenly vision given to him there during his exile on the island of Patmos, St. John tells us that he sees a vast “multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” It is an inspiring picture of the Church of Christ of all times and of all places—made up of people from every race and nationality, speaking every language on earth, and all united in the perfect oneness of faith as they sing the praises of their triune Savior-God. They are not divided by the petty tribalisms and childish enmities which trouble our world—they belong to the one Church of Christ, and there is no imperfection in their love for the Lamb who sits on the throne or for each other.

That is how the elder identifies them, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” “The great tribulation” of which the elder speaks surely includes the time of periodic persecution which was just beginning when John had this vision and which would continue for almost three centuries until the Roman emperor himself became a Christian. But that great tribulation also includes the walk of every one of Christ’s people through this “valley of the shadow of death”—their walk through this sin-infested world in which they must bear the assaults of Satan and the hostility of an unbelieving world. And their tribulation included the battles they were

forced to wage also against their own flesh—the burden for them of the attraction of sins of every kind as they struggled to walk in the footsteps of their Savior. By faith, they were saints of Christ here in their sojourn on earth, and our thanksgiving for them today includes also this, that now their tribulation is over.

II

They have, says the elder, “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Every one of that vast multitude which no one could number wears a gleaming robe of white, and every one of them praises their Savior—the incarnate Son of God, the Lamb who sits on the throne with the Father—because they know in joyful faith that He and He alone is responsible for their presence there and for the perfection of their attire.

They are “saints of Christ,” and yet not one of that vast multitude would claim any credit for his or her status. Every one of them had joined regularly in the confession of sin with which we begin our worship—that they not only had sinned against their Creator in thought, word, and deed, but also that they were conceived and born in sin. They carried with them the sinful nature which also burdens us. They were born into the same fallenness into which we have been born, carrying with them that same sinful flesh in which, as St. Paul says, there is nothing good.

But their robes are now perfectly clean and white, because, as the elder says, they have “washed (them) in the blood of the Lamb.” In penitent faith, they learned to plead not their own good works or their own righteousness, but that of the incarnate Son of God who went to the cross for them and for us. The life that He offered up there on that tree of execution is the all-sufficient sacrifice for their sin and for ours. The blood which He shed there on the hill Golgotha is the cleansing-agent for the robes which they now wear before His throne—the same robes given to us through our faith.

By their penitent trust in Christ Jesus, they also laid claim to His resurrection on that first Easter morning. In faith they have shared in His triumph over the grave and now take part forever in His life of perfect love and joy. That is the reason for their song of praise as they are gathered around Him—their song filled with a perfect happiness which will never end.

“He who sits on the throne will dwell among them,” says the elder to St. John. “They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Their perfect bliss which will go on eternally—that, too, is the reason that we give thanks to our

Savior-God on this All Saints Sunday.

III

And we also acknowledge today and offer our heartfelt thanks for the role that these saints of God have played in our lives. In the “Responsive Prayer of the Church” in which we will join again today, you and I will give thanks for, among other things, “the lives of all the faithful.” We do so because it is through them that we, too, have been so richly blessed by our incarnate Lord.

They are gathered there around His throne—parents and grandparents, beloved family members and friends, former pastors and teachers and church-members whom we have known and loved and who have played such an important role in our lives of faith. It was in their arms that Christ Jesus carried us to the baptismal font. It was with their hands that He led us to church on Sundays to hear His Word. It was through their mouths that He instructed us in the Catechism, taught us Gospel-filled hymns, and read His Scriptures to us. It was their acts of forgiveness and kindness and self-giving love which our Lord used as examples for us of the life which He has won for us. For the role that they played in our own lives of faith—for the ways in which Christ Jesus acted through them and spoke through them to teach us and to strengthen us—for that, too, we offer our heartfelt thanksgiving on this All Saints Sunday.

And we are thus reminded also of the joyful responsibility which is given to us. By faith, you and I, too, wear robes which have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Through our faith in Christ Jesus, we share even now in His triumph over death, and we look forward to joining our loved ones who have stepped ahead of us and are now gathered before His throne. And now, ours must be the hands and the feet and the voices through which our Savior preaches and instructs and exemplifies His love. Our prayer on this All Saints Sunday is that our Lord and Savior would help us—inspire us, equip us, strengthen us—thus to be His instruments through which He expands His Church and gathers His saints to Himself.

May the Holy Spirit grant this to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.