

CLOTHED IN ROBES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE
LAMB

Sermon for All Saints' Day, 2017

Revelation 7:9-17

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our First Reading from before, Revelation 7:9-17: ⁹ **After this, I looked, and saw a large crowd that no one could count, from every nation and all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes, and carrying palm-branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They called out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"**

¹¹ **All the angels were standing around the throne, around the elders, and around the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honour, power, and strength be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."**

¹³ **Then one of the elders asked me: "Who are these people who have been clothed in the white robes, and where have they come from?"**

¹⁴ **I replied to him, "My master, you know."**

He told me: "These are the people who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore they are before the throne of God and keep serving Him day and night in His temple, and He who is sitting on the throne will shelter them with His tent. ¹⁶ They will not be hungry any more or thirsty any more. The sun will certainly not beat on them, or any scorching heat, ¹⁷ because the Lamb, who is in the middle of the throne, will be their Shepherd, and He will lead them to springs of the water of life. God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It was on the eve of All Saints' Day when Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg in the year 1517. Since we date the beginning of the Reformation from Martin Luther's action on that day, the anniversary of the Reformation and All Saints' Day always come back to back. All Saints' Day is always on November 1. Therefore, the anniversary of the Reformation is always on October 31. We have good solid historic and traditional reasons for celebrating these two days back-to-back. In order to accommodate both days, we generally celebrate the anniversary of the Reformation on the last Sunday in October, and we celebrate All Saints' Day on the first Sunday in November.

History and tradition are not the only reason we celebrate these two days on consecutive Sundays. There is also the profound effect that the Reformation had on the meaning of All Saints' Day. That is because the church in which Martin Luther grew up had badly corrupted the true, Biblical meaning of the word saint. When the Reformation restored the teachings of the Bible, it also restored the true meaning of the word saint. Naturally, if the meaning of the word saint changes so does the meaning of All Saints' Day.

The early church began recognising the death of the martyrs who died for the faith by setting aside a day of remembrance for them. This was a good thing. The only thing is that there were quickly more martyrs than there are days in the year. The other thing is that the early church recognised that not all the martyrs were recorded - there were martyrs who were known only to God. So, a day recognising *all the saints* would give the Church an opportunity to praise God for the blessings that He worked in the lives of even the unknown martyrs.

One of the most preserved and influential buildings of ancient Rome that one can see and visit today is the Pantheon. The Pantheon was a former Roman temple, built and dedicated to all Roman gods until the year 609 when the

Byzantine Emperor Phocas gave the temple to the bishop of Rome, Boniface IV, who then consecrated the Pantheon, turning it into the Church of St. Mary and Martyrs on May 13, 609. This day was therefore set aside as the Feast of All Saints. Later, Gregory III changed the date to November 1 when he dedicated a chapel in St. Peter's basilica. In the year 835, Gregory IV ordered the Feast of All Saints to be universally observed on Nov. 1.

However, down through the years, the church began to stray from the teachings of Holy Scripture, and the Feast of All Saints soon evolved into a day not only to remember and thank God for the saints, but also to venerate and pray to the saints in heaven for various helps. The original intent of All Saints' Day faded away.

Today, the official position of the Roman Catholic Church teaches that a relationship with God is a lot like a relationship with a bank. It is as if Jesus enabled you to have an account in God's Bank of Grace when He died on the cross. At your baptism, Jesus opened an account in your name and made a deposit in it. Every time you sin, you must pay for your sin from that account. Every time you perform an act of penance, you receive an additional deposit in that account. So, if you have a particularly bad day, you lose grace with God and your account decreases. If you perform some act of penance such as attending mass, donating to a worthy charity, saying the 'Our Father' or 'Hail Mary,' venerating a relic, and so forth, then your account of grace will increase. So, as you live your life, your account in God's Bank of Grace is constantly changing.

Now here's the deal. When you die, you need to have so much grace in your account. If you have enough, then you go straight to heaven. If you don't have enough, then you must do penance by suffering in purgatory until you do have enough. Most people who believe this expect to spend some time in purgatory when they die.

From time-to-time, the Roman Catholic Church will declare that someone went straight to heaven when they died. That means that that someone had more than enough grace in his or her account. The Roman Catholic Church will declare that someone to be a saint. After the saint gains admission into

heaven, they no longer need the grace that remains in God's Bank of Grace. The saints donate this extra grace to the Treasury of Merits. The Roman Catholic church then administers the Treasury of Merits and distributes this grace to its members as it sees fit.

Obviously, a saint couldn't sin very much and they had to perform extraordinary acts of penance. A saint is sort of like a super Christian. Our culture has taken this definition and uses the word saint to mean an amazingly wonderful person.

On the other hand, the Bible uses the word saint in a different way. When we search the Scriptures concerning the saints, we come across passages like our first reading for today. In the vision that God gave to John, he met an elder who asked him a question. **"Who are these people who have been clothed in the white robes, and where have they come from?"**

Perhaps John was too awestruck to give an answer, so he replied, **"My master, you know."**

The elder said to him, **"These are the people who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb.** These words bring together images from all over the Bible. It uses these Biblical images to describe the saints.

One of the keys to understanding the Bible is context. It is especially important that we use the context of Scripture interpreting Scripture when we are in the Book of Revelation. What does it mean that the saints **have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb?**

The Bible often uses the image of clothing to represent the gifts that God gives us so that we can appear in His presence with joy and not with fear. Listen to Isaiah as he praised God for the clothing of salvation. *"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels,"* (Isaiah 61:10).

The Bible is rich in this imagery of filthy garments representing our own sins and the condemnation we deserve because of those sins. It is also rich in the imagery of new, luxurious, clean garments representing the righteousness that we must have to stand before God without fear. The imagery teaches that we are totally helpless to remove our filthy garments of sin, but that God, in His mercy and grace, removes our garments of sins, cleanses us, and then dresses us in His garments of righteousness.

One of the strange things about the garments of righteousness is the way in which a person receives this righteousness. It is through the blood of Jesus Christ. It is just as the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Peter to say; “*You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot,*” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The writer to the Hebrews also speaks of the healing power of blood; “*For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God,*” (Hebrews 9:13-14).

The blood that all these passages refers to is the blood that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ gave up when He allowed mere men to torture Him with beatings, whips, thorns, and crucifixion. He gave up His blood to death, even death on a cross, in order to purify the garments of righteousness that make us acceptable in the presence of God. In fact, they make us much more than acceptable. **They mark us as dear children of God our heavenly father.**

The suffering and death of Jesus Christ show that He is the fulfillment of the prophecies that point to the coming Messiah, especially the prophecies of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament. By the power of the Holy Spirit John the Baptist recognised this, pointed at Jesus, and declared, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). Therefore Jesus will forevermore be known as the Lamb of God.

Thus, the description of the saints in heaven from Revelation brings the images of the robes of righteousness and the blood of the Lamb together to give us a description of the saints who will remain in God's kingdom forever. The filthy old rags of their sins have been removed, and they have been given new clothes, clothes that have been cleansed by the suffering and death of Jesus Christ who is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Now, if you are beginning to think that the Biblical definition of saint and the Biblical definition of Christian are the same, then you are right. A saint is someone whom God has declared holy for the sake of the perfect life and the innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The saint receives this declaration of holiness by the Holy Spirit's gift of faith.

As we think back to members of our parish who have said good bye to life in this world, we thank God that while still on this earth, they confessed the filthy rags of their sins regularly, received the Gospel of Jesus Christ along with the water of Holy Baptism, and for most, took the Gospel into their mouths as they ate the body and drank the blood of their Saviour. Yet for all these fellow Christians, they **have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb**. Now, our Lord Jesus Christ has called them out of this veil of tears to Himself in heaven. There they wait for the coming of the Last Day with all the saints.

We can give thanks for the work that God did in them and through them while they were here. We can also give thanks for the work of the saints who still live with us here in time. We, the baptised saints of God, continue to confess our sins. We continue to hear and taste the Gospel for the forgiveness of sins as it comes to us in Word and Sacrament. We continue to watch for the day when Jesus Christ our Lord calls us out of this veil of sorrows to Himself in heaven, or, should we still be here on the Last day, we will join in the resurrection of that Day.

On that Last Day, God will raise all the dead and transform the decaying dust of our flesh into a new, immortal body. God will destroy this present, sinful earth and replace it with a new heaven and earth. There, all who believe in Jesus Christ shall join the **large crowd that no one could count, from every**

nation and all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes, and carrying palm-branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They called out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” There, we shall live with the Lamb and enjoy His presence forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

ALL SAINTS DAY

Revelation 7:9-17

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1 John 3:1-3

¹ See what great love the Father has given to us, that we are called “the children of God”! That is what we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it has not known Him. ² Dearly loved people, we are now the children of God, but it has not yet been shown what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is.

³ Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountainside. When He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² Then He began to speak, and continued to teach them:

³ “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit! For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn! For they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are those who are meek! For they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness! For they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are those who are merciful! For they will be treated mercifully.

⁸ “Blessed are those who are pure in heart! For they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are those who make peace! For they will be called ‘the children of God.’

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who have been persecuted because of righteousness! For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, because of Me! ¹² Rejoice and be very glad! For your reward in heaven is great. For in this way people persecuted the prophets who were before you.