

All Saints

Our First Reading today comes from the Book of Revelation, where Christ Jesus reveals to us through Saint John a vision of the Church militant on earth, as well as the Church in glory.

In the book of Revelation, there are many strange and horrifying images of the evils of these End Times. We are in the Last Days even now, and some of the terrors inflicted upon mankind and the Church are truly demonic. For they are not only the outward signs of bloody persecution, but also the subtle temptations of the ancient serpent. Such things are so devious that even the elect of God would fall away, if that were possible.

In the midst of these evil horrors, the Lord shows to Saint John and to us two wonderful visions of the Church. In the midst of her warfare on this earth, the Church is lined up in military fashion by divisions, like the armies of ancient Israel. In groups of twelve thousand they are assembled, ready for battle.

Who are these 144,000? In the usual way that the visions reveal themselves in the book of Revelation, the numbers and images are symbolic. We should not look for them only among people of Israelite descent, since Saint Paul has said that all who have faith are the children of Abraham, and heirs of the promise, regardless of their race or nation. There is neither Jew nor Greek in the new Covenant of grace. *For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ.* We are one in Christ, and since we are His, then we are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

So in Christ, the Israel of God is not by flesh, meaning those who are born with the right ancestors. No, we are the Israel of God because we are born by the Spirit into the freedom of the Gospel. We are the Church militant. We are the 144,000.

God's promise to us is that, even in the midst of the terrors of this present age, we are sealed by the living God. We are set upon a firm foundation most certainly, not because we have done good things, but because the Lord knows us as one of His own. We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is our pledge and guarantee of the inheritance that God has promised us.

How can we know for certain that the Spirit has sealed us this way? Because He has come to us already in the promise of the Gospel. He has come to us through His Sword, which is the Word. We dare not look to our emotions for certainty that we have been sealed by the Spirit. Emotions come and go. We dare not look for visions or signs or special gifts. These also may or may not come. But the Gospel promise is always sure and certain. This promise has been made to us, even now today.

Where else can we look for the seal of God? A sign and seal for Old Testament Israel was circumcision. But we are sealed with the circumcision not made with hands, because God puts off the sinful flesh from us in Baptism and has raised us up to new life in the resurrection of Christ, freely forgiving all our transgressions. In this, also, we can be certain that the Holy Spirit has sealed us to life everlasting.

Sadly, those who do not receive these seals of God's grace should expect no certainty. Those who reject the Word should not feel secure. Those who think that they are good enough to be one of God's saints should be terrified, since they have built a house upon sinking sand. For all those who do not repent of their sins and put no trust in Christ should find no certainty in the Word or Baptism that they once heard. They have thrust themselves out from the 144,000 since they despise the seal of God in Water and the Word.

But we are sealed. We are safe. We need not fear the power of any enemy, since we are kept safe by God even against Satan.

We do not rely on our own merits, since we have been given the full merits of Christ's righteousness and His cleansing Blood. With this Blood, our spiritual garments have been washed completely clean. This means that we have the white, shining holiness of Christ the Lord covering us. We cannot see this holiness, but must wait for the Final Day to see it revealed, when all flesh is raised, and every believer is transfigured into the likeness of Christ our Lord.

That is the Day when we will stand with the innumerable host of God's saints. We will see the incredible number of all who have been kept safe by their Lord even in the midst of the great tribulation that Satan is bringing down upon the Church. The dear Lamb has led them as a gentle Shepherd, through the terrible dangers of this valley of the shadow of death. Even now He is shepherding us, speaking with His kindly voice to reassure us of His love and protection. His sheep know His voice and listen faithfully, and in this way will be led into the new, bright Day of endless green pastures and fountains of living waters.

That Day will be a second Palm Sunday. As the people welcomed Christ into Jerusalem with palm branches and hosannas, so we will welcome the Lord Jesus who will reveal Himself to all nations. Then all tears and pain will be forgotten in a single moment, as all joys are realised in the shining face of our God and Brother who took our flesh to redeem us. Then He will lead us into the new heaven and earth, where all death will be forgotten except the death of the Lamb that saved us.

What is our present trouble compared with that glorious end? It is nothing. What are the threats of Satan compared to the gracious promises of the God-Man Jesus Christ? What is our cross of tribulation compared to the majestic Cross of Calvary that has established salvation by the precious Blood of the holy Lamb?

The Spirit remind us of these great yet hidden realities until the Day that they are revealed to all eyes.

Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour and power and might, be to our God forever and ever!