
THE DEAD ALIVE AND THE ALIVE DEAD
Sermon for All Saints' Day 2020
Revelation 7:2-17

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 we just heard read, Revelation 7:2-17: ² **Then I saw another angel coming up from the east with the seal of the living God. He called out with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage the land and the sea, ³ saying: “Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads!”**

⁴ **Then I heard the number of those who had been sealed: “one hundred and forty-four thousand.” These were those who had been sealed were from every tribe of the people of Israel. ⁵ From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand had been sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, ⁶ from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, ⁷ from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, ⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand and from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand had been sealed. 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 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 longer or thirsty any longer. 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 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,

As we go about our business every day, we come into contact with all kinds of people. We see them walking around, talking, driving in their cars, sometimes showing their disregard for the law by talking or even texting on their phones at the same time. Anyway, they're doing what people do, and, as they're doing it, they certainly seem to be full of life. They're breathing, and their hearts are beating, there's brain activity going on - in other words, they are alive. The reality, however, is quite different. We know that for sure, because the One who defines reality, Jesus, says so. In the Gospel of John, chapter 5, Jesus had just healed an invalid on the Sabbath. So the Jewish leaders, accusing Him of breaking Sabbath law, began to persecute Him. They were further angered because He *“was also calling God His own Father, making Himself equal to God”* (John 5:18). That was blasphemy. Jesus then went on to speak of His own authority, and that authority included these words, *“Truly, truly, I tell you that the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live”* (John 5:25).

What was Jesus talking about? At first glance, it may seem that He was referring to the resurrection on the Last Day; but He specifically says that the time is *“now here”* already, which rules out the Last Day because that's a *future event*. A second guess could be to think that He was talking about that handful of dead persons whom He had raised to life during His earthly ministry, but that isn't the idea either because He said that the time in question was both now and is yet to come - which means that *it will continue for some time after His ministry*. No, what He was talking about are people who hear His Gospel and come to faith in Him. These are the dead who are being brought to life.

Pause to think on this for a moment because it is really quite astonishing. As Christians, we would all agree that it's wonderful when someone comes to faith. Jesus says, *“there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”* (Luke 15:10), and indeed we too rejoice. But I wonder how often we see or appreciate it for the full miracle that it is: the coming to life of one who was dead - for that is the way Jesus describes it. This means that so many of those people we see going about their

business, the majority of them, are not really alive at all. They are nothing more than animated corpses: the living dead.

Real life from the Lord's point of view, has nothing to do with whether you're breathing, or your heart is beating. No, it's defined instead as being in a proper relationship with the Lord who is the source of all life. To be more specific, it's being in a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. If any has such a relationship, he is alive quite independent of the mechanics of biology because *he is plugged into the source of life*. If one does not have that, then he is dead even while he is alive. Sure, he is still moving around and what not; but it's more like being a wind-up toy: the spring keeps running down, and one day it will stop for good. But whether it's running or not, spiritually speaking there's nobody home - or to be more precise, the "body" that's home is a corpse. But when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which is active in the Word of Christ's Gospel as it is shared,¹ faith emerges in the heart of someone who was formerly an unbeliever, that faith is held by a new and living soul that has been created and breathed into that person by God. It's not at all unlike what He did for the lifeless hunk of clay that was Adam when he was first formed.² It truly is the miracle of giving life.

So, it matters immensely the words we choose and the way we understand things, which leads to another perception problem we have. This one concerns those people we know who have died in the faith. Typically, we say they're dead - or we use euphemisms like "passed on," "passed away" or "deceased." Any way we say it, we usually mean the same thing: they are dead and gone: their life is over.

No, it isn't. After His close friend Lazarus had died, in His conversation with Martha about death and resurrection, Jesus said to her, "*everyone who lives and believes in Me will assuredly never die*" (John 11:26). And in our text from the Revelation of St. John we hear how that beloved apostle was granted to see "**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!"** The elder asks him, "**Who are these people who have been clothed in the white robes and where have they come from?**" John answers, "**My master, you know.**" It seems to be his way of saying, "*I was hoping you'd tell me.*" The elder then tells him, "**These are the people who have come out of the great tribulation.**" He's talking about the faithful who have died on earth, many having been martyred, but all of them have carried their crosses for the Lord in one way or another through the trials and troubles of this world. Now they stand in glory and perfection because their sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ. They are singing their hymns of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord who has brought them through it all, and who now cares for and shelters them where there is no more sadness or want of any kind. But what we need to highlight is that they are there *now*. While their bodies remain on earth waiting for the Day of Resurrection, their spirits are there already enjoying a foretaste of heavenly splendour.

The point is that we very often misspeak when we say certain people are dead. If they lived in the faith in their time on earth, they are in fact still *very much alive*.

So, we don't see things as they are. A lot of those we would say are living are dead, and a lot of those we would say are dead are living. Hopefully, that's clear by now. But as long as we're clearing up mistaken perceptions, here are a few other ways we tend not to see things as they are. The first has to do with the graves of those who have died. We tend to have a sense of permanence about the grave. We even call them the "final resting places" of the bodies buried within. Once again, nothing could be further from the truth. Returning to John's Gospel for a moment. After telling us that the dead comes to life through hearing His Word (speaking of those who come to faith in Him), Jesus goes on to say, "*Do not be astonished at this, because an hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice²⁹ and will come out*" (John 5:28-29).

There's nothing permanent about a grave. It's just a temporary holding place for a body that will certainly be raised to life again. As a matter of fact, our word "cemetery" is derived from the Greek word for "dormitory," that is, a place to sleep. And sometimes it causes us to pause and wonder how in the world that may be accomplished. How could all those bodies buried and decayed, or burnt to ashes, or consumed by animals, or whatever, how could they possibly come forth alive again? We needn't worry about the details. Surely it will be a small thing for the Lord who has managed to call all things into existence from nothing to merely reassemble human bodies from elements that already exist.

And raise them up He will with a single command of His voice on the Last Day, which we often mistakenly refer to as the Day of Judgment. Some Christians aren't looking forward to that day. Why? Because they have in their minds a scene where they are standing in the dock before the judgment seat of God. Played out before the court is all the lurid details of their sins and misdeeds, the promises broken, the hurtful, hateful, idle words, even the wicked imaginings and selfish thoughts the person had in life. For people who think this way the prospect of such a scene taking place terrifies them.

Well, there is Day of Judgment coming; *but it will not be for those who believe and trust in Christ*. For them, that day has already happened. It took place on Good Friday when the judgment of God fell on Jesus as He offered Himself on the cross.

¹ Romans 10:17

² Genesis 2:7

There He took upon Himself the judgment we deserve on account of our sins. Now, for those who trust in Him, *there are no outstanding charges*. They cannot be called into the courtroom. Not only have believers passed from death to life, but they have also passed out of judgment. Paul says the same thing in Romans when he asks, “*Who will accuse those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies*” (Romans 8:33). So, for believers, there is no Day of Judgment coming. On the Last Day they will already be standing with the saints, clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

This leads to the last misperception to clear up. On this day, we celebrate “All Saints.” Usually, when we think about the saints, we think primarily of those who have gone before us - and particularly those who led especially noteworthy, holy lives, doing wonderful things in the service of the Lord, or who suffered grievously while contending for the faith. They are rightly called saints, to be sure; but not because of anything they had done or endured. They are saints only because by God’s gift of faith worked in them through hearing the Word of Jesus, they trusted in what He accomplished for them. That’s what entitled them to be called holy and enabled them to stand before the throne in everlasting perfection. And that too is what enabled them to endure their fiery trials and do holy work in the Lord’s service while here below.

The last thought then is this: what made them saints, their faith in Christ, is the same thing we have. So we, too, are rightly called saints. In many of his Letters to the churches, Paul began by reminding his hearers that they indeed were saints.³ This day that we celebrate is our day too, and celebrate it we do in the best way we can.

While our dearly departed are “**standing before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and carrying palm-branches in their hands**” and singing God’s praise, we who walk as yet by faith and not by sight join them every time we gather around the altar of the Lamb and receive to ourselves His body, His blood, and His Word of forgiveness that strengthens our faith and clothes us in the same white robes of righteousness that they wear. We do it as a foretaste of the feast to come when we shall, with them, see things as they really are. May God in His mercy hasten that day, and grant to us all He has promised for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR ALL SAINTS’ DAY

Almighty God and Father, in wisdom You have made the world and all things, seen and unseen. We praise You for the gift of life, for the wonderful creation of our bodies, for our moral and spiritual capacities, and for the marvellous gifts of intelligence and reason. But, above all else, we thank and praise You for the gift of faith, by which we know You and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. We praise and worship Him for showing us Your great love by dying the death that enables sinners to live for ever. We praise You for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who has brought us to faith in Jesus, and has changed our hearts from rebellion against You to love and praise for You.

Today we thank you for all the saints remembered and forgotten, for those dear souls who are now standing in Your presence. We thank You for calling them in this life to be Your children, and we thank You that we too, have been called by You to be saints.

Therefore, let us clearly recognise what it means to be called the children of God, and to remember that we are your saints not by our own inclination or strength, but simply by Your gracious call and forgiveness that we have freely received through our Saviour, Christ Jesus.

In mercy, pour out Your Spirit on us anew each day, so that our love, knowledge, and spiritual power may keep on growing, and our lives may be filled with the truly good qualities that only Jesus Christ can produce. Lead us by Your Spirit to love one another with brotherly love, and to forgive one another as You have forgiven us for Christ’s sake.

Keep Your church in the true fellowship of the Gospel, that it may stand firm in the faith. Protect it against all its enemies, that it may serve You freely. We ask you to continue to bless the ministry of the AELC and ULMA, and to raise up men to be pastors to Your flock. Let Your light continue to shine that we may be witnesses to You.

We remember those of Your children who are being persecuted because of their faith. Uphold them by Your Spirit, and give them patient endurance, that they may witness to Your saving power. Move those who oppress them to turn to You. Free Your people from all falsehood and error and lead them along the road of truth and godliness.

Bring shame and discredit on those who are advocating to legalise euthanasia. Let Your light dispel the darkness of sin and spiritual ignorance, giving wisdom and strength to all in authority in our country, that they may serve according to Your direction, and our people may live in unity and uprightness. Lead people everywhere to enjoy peace and happiness as they learn to love and follow You.

Move parents to sow Your Word in the hearts of their children, that the young may be raised in the ways of Christ and live lives that are a blessing to church, country, and mankind. Give parents the understanding and patience they need for their God-given responsibilities.

³ Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Colossians 1:2, Ephesians 1:1, Philipians 1:1.

Watch over the sick, the sad, and the troubled. We pray especially for all those in our own congregation who may be unwell. Stand by them in their various sufferings and help them in all their burdens. Protect all who are in any danger of body or soul and save them by Your wise love. Help us in all times of need to look to You for pardon, peace, and healing.

These, and all other things that we may need, give us for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

ALL SAINTS DAY

Revelation 7:2-17

² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east with the seal of the living God. He called out with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage the land and the sea, ³ saying: "Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads!"

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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 lead them to springs of the water of life. God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

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.