

The Festival of All Saints (observed)
3 November, Anno Domini 2024
Revelation 7:2-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Blessed of the Lord,

The Festival of All Saints is really so important. Not because Jesus commanded its observance. He most certainly doesn't though the Apostle Paul holds the saints before us at length in his letter to the Hebrews and then says "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." (Heb. 12:1) Rather the importance of this festival lies in our own need for its comfort.

Year after year, people we love are called away from this valley of sorrow. Year after year chairs and beds are emptied to fill coffins and graves. Some are very young, surviving mere hours after being delivered while still others' faces are never even known to us. Still others are blessed with many years of life and enjoy an abundance of the Lord's riches during their earthly life, though certainly not without their own crosses. In all cases, the fact remains the same - they are no longer here with us. We can't talk to them or laugh or cry with them.

This is, in large part, why the Lord granted this vision to John and why the Church has given us to hear this vision every year. God's children who are left are in deep need of two-fold comfort. First, we need to be reminded that our beloved departed who have fallen asleep in Christ are not simply okay but are actually better than they were. This year's list of the of the faithful departed is one of the longest we have had. We want to be assured that their faith and their hope were not put to shame. Second, we want to know that our own trials and struggles will one day end and we too will know the blessedness of heaven.

To us, to you, Christ says and shows that all who close their eyes in faith, whose robes have been made white by the Blood of Jesus poured upon them in Holy Baptism and into their ears in Holy Absolution and into their mouths in Holy Communion, who have endured the scorn and hatred and oppression of evil, have been and will be granted their place in heaven around His throne. Their mouths are now filled with the song of heaven, an eternal hymn of praise - and one day ours

will be too. They no longer know anything of sin or pain or fear or disappointment or sorrow or death. All they know now and forever is peace and joy and rest of the highest order. And that is what we are looking forward to.

But it is essential that we properly understand why this has been granted to them so that we don't cast aside this eternal bliss because we thought wrongly about how it is obtained. For this we turn to the words of the Lamb from Matthew 5. There Jesus tells us who the blessed ones are both now and in eternity. They are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for the sake of righteousness and the sake of Christ. Our flesh imagines that the saints are the truly good people, the ones who led the most upright and pious lives. And while it is certainly true that the saints in heaven were upright and pious, they were in a very quiet and unassuming way. You see, those whom Jesus describes as blessed are the very ones who are most likely not to be noticed and acclaimed among men, whether inside or outside the church. Truly, the world likely mocked them, dismissed them, even hated and persecuted them as the rich man despised Lazarus and the Pharisee despised the tax collector.

When you are robed in the white robe of Christ's righteousness, and you set your heart on the things of Christ who, as the eternal and sinless Son of God humbled Himself to the very lowest form of a servant, you too are called away from the power, the pride, the malice, the greed, the covetousness, the jealousy, and the passions that define not only the unbelieving world but also your very own flesh. To the blessed, every thought and desire and plan is suspect and needs to be run through the filter of God's Word - not simply to find a way to justify it, but to actually see if it is evil and needs to be discarded. And know for certain that your flesh will fight and resist that effort. And when your life is shaped by Christ, when you are conformed to the image of Christ, you will receive the same warm welcome that Christ did as they mocked Him, called Him a blasphemer and false teacher, and nailed Him to the cross. The world is acutely aware that the words and actions of Christians is a testament against it, a preaching of the Law which says that what it is doing is evil and hated by God. It hates the idea of being poor in spirit, of mourning sin and evil, of being meek or merciful or a peacemaker. It despises the notion that it isn't righteous. And who in their right mind doesn't flee persecution and seek a way out? But the world does not receive that preaching kindly. It hates it because it hates God. The world, with all of its accomplishments and so-called wisdom is appalled that anyone would dare to call it evil. It wants to be considered the holiest and most pious of all while the children of God who believe the Bible are decried, imprisoned, and killed as bigots, racists, sexists,

loveless, exclusionary, and hateful. That is exactly what it thought of Jesus. And now He sits exalted at the right hand of majesty and power. His Word and His sacrifice have been vindicated by God.

To be as Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount means emptying yourself and any notion that you or this world are good or right or holy or wise. But this is precisely the life of faith - despairing of yourself and finding all hope, peace, and joy in Christ. That, Christ says, is the life of the blessed. That's why the blessed are the ones who don't look blessed. They aren't trying to be noticed. They don't chase after the extraordinary. They look weak. They look tired. They aren't loud. They don't chase likes and audiences. They patiently endure the world's wrath and hatred. They claim no right or privilege. They lament and hate the evil they know lies within their own heart.

In the vision granted to St. John we are given to see not only what will be and the eternal joy and bliss of our beloved departed Christians, but also what is now. We also see what belongs to Christ's children on earth even though we in this world feel anything but blessed. We can't see it now, but we are most certainly a part of that great heavenly host standing before the Lamb. We simply cannot be gathered here listening to the Word of God and being fed with the Body and Blood of Christ and not also be gathered with the Church which is standing around the throne in heaven at perfect rest. We are God's children NOW, not just in name but in reality. He is our Father NOW. We are redeemed. Sin and death have no power over us because even though we are in the midst of the great tribulation, our robes have still been washed in Christ's Blood. We are righteous, holy, and good because He has declared it to be so. Neither we nor the world can see it, but God has told you and even given you a glimpse of that truth to sustain us as we await the fullness of the resurrection.

Thanks be to God who comforts and sustains in this life and who has granted all the saints who have gone before us including Evie, Margie, Mary, Luella, Mary, Franklin, and Robert a place in that multitude which cannot be numbered. Let their songs of praise and thanksgiving be ours as together we worship our God who sits on the throne and the Lamb. Hosanna in the highest!

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and

your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.