

## The Feast of All Saints (transferred), MMXVII

Immanuel Evang. Luth. Church, Wichita, KS

### Revelation to John VII.xiv-xvii

*“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have 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 shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

When in the Gospels Christ speaks to us about having Life – that is, life with God, true life – through his choice of words he makes it clear that this is not something a person has simply by virtue of being born. To put it another way: In relation to God it is one thing to be a breathing, thinking organism – no matter how intelligent – and quite another to be alive. Some live very long lives, appearing in the world’s eyes to enjoy the good life, who never do receive the blessing of Life that God bestows on his chosen ones.

This doctrine of Life forms the basis of our having a Feast of All Saints: We commemorate, not merely the lives of people who have gone before us, but those who, during their span of days and by God’s grace, entered into Life itself. God came to live in them, and they in God.

So, in one way this festival forces us to make a distinction between two groups of people that we naturally view together. For every day and everywhere, at all times and in all places, walking the earth and interacting with each other are those who are truly alive to God, and others who to God are already dead. Not that you or I can point and say who belongs to which – God alone knows who actually are his own. No, our calling is not to guess or speculate about others, but to hold on to Him for dear life using those

means of staying alive that Christ gives to his Church.

But this much we can say: John's apocalyptic vision of saints singing with everlasting joy does not depict the universal destiny of all mankind. As countless as the ranks of worshipers may be in today's Epistle, the words of Jesus still hold true:

*The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many... the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few ...*

And lest any of us imagine that salvation is ensured by our sitting in a pew and mouthing the right words, Christ goes on:

*Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven...*

This is not work-righteousness. This is Christ declaring that just as *not all that shines is gold*, not all that appears to be faith is genuine. This distinction, too, we must always make.

But just as much as All Saints Day requires a sober separation between those on the way to heaven and those headed for hell, and even between those truly striving and those merely pretending, this festival also does the opposite: In today's reading John sees joined as one those we often tend to separate.

When most people consider God's gift of eternal life, they think purely in terms of how long it shall last, namely, forever. Their definition of eternal life is simply, "life that never ends." But if we listen to Christ carefully, he puts the emphasis where it belongs: on when and how eternal life begins for us. To his disciples he says:

*Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

And in his great prayer to the Father Christ declares:

*This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

This means that at this moment, not only are those saints who have gone before us living in God's presence; but that every moment saints on earth and saints above are living in the unity of the Holy Spirit with each other. In Christian tradition, as the pastor speaks

our prayer to God before Holy Communion, he says, *Therefore with angels and archangels and all the host of heaven.*” Why does he do so, and why at that moment?

This reference to *all the host of heaven* affirms that in this Holy Supper of Jesus’ body and blood we come into the presence of God in an intimate, salutary way that is truly a foretaste of when we shall meet him face-to-face. And since there is one Lord Christ with his disciples, in our hymns and through our faith in God’s Word we are worshiping God, not apart from, but in one great service with, those who have gone before us.

But as you well know, this life that we share in the living Christ is not all gladness and singing. John’s perspective on the earthly realm is not only sober but often grim – not least of all because he has seen in his days earthly powers that claim to be gods – rulers that demand our worship and obedience, money that leads people to sell their souls. When John asks his angel-guide who these white-robed worshipers are, this pageant of saints robed in beauty, the angel replies:

*These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

The vision shows us their glory. The vision shows us their victory. The vision shows us their joy. It does not show the tears they have shed, the temptations they have fought, the hostility they have suffered from enemies of God’s word, the losses they have endured.

Why do we come here each week? Not because we have triumphed at every turn. Every day we stumble in our faith in any number of ways: failing to pray, neglecting God’s Word, wounding others with our words, craving stuff does not give life, seeking praise of others.

We comes together, not wearing the white robe of victorious athletes for Christ, but wearing robes are white because they have been washed in the red blood of Jesus, in the Lamb’s blood that takes our sin away. So decisive, so final is his victory over our sin and over our death, that we boldly come to the banquet, worthy to feast not because we have performed so magnificently, but solely because we have been clothed in his righteousness.

This past week my students and I, as we studied the Medieval church, discussed

whether or not the saints gone before us pray for us. They well may – Scripture barely touches on the question. But if they do, these saints intercede not because unlike us they never faltered, but because they were weak on earth, they struggled with their own lusts, they feared even when Christ taught them, “Don’t be afraid.” And now, as they behold our true High Priest interceding for us, the Son of God, they may well join him in his prayer for all the saints on earth.

However, what matters is not whether or not the saints above pray for us, but that we never cease to pray God for the strength to remain in the grace of his Son, and so finish the race set before us. So St. Paul writes of eternal life as something we already possess, but he also describes to his spiritual son Timothy what he must do every day:

*Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*

No one knows better than those who have gone ahead if us just how hard it can be, but also how joyous it can be, contending together of the crown of life. ☩