

# "Who Are They? Who Are You?"

Revelation 7:9-17 & 1 John 3:1-3

November 6, 2011

All Saints' Day

Today, we observe All Saints' Day. It is a day to talk about saints – the holy people of God.

Two questions come up immediately when we talk about saints. Who are they? Who are we?

The scene in our first reading is how we typically visualize saints. In his heavenly vision, St. John sees a great multitude from every nation, people, and language. They are standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and singing praise to God and to the Lamb Jesus Christ. The angels of heaven join them in this sacred place for this time of worship and praise.

When we look at that group, we tend to think, "Now, *those* are saints." They certainly look like holy people – clothed in white robes. They certainly act like holy people – standing around the throne God and praising Him. By all outward appearances, they appear to be saints.

That is how many people view saints – both at the time of the reformation and now. Saints are those people who look like holy people in their appearance and act like holy people in their behavior. In Luther's time, saints were those people who had not only achieved holiness but had achieved extra holiness which could be dispensed to people when people prayed to saints or when they purchased indulgences. In our time, that image remains. Saints are those people like Mother Theresa who are exemplary in their faith and conduct.

We compare that vision and ideal of saint to our own lives and the comparison is not a very favorable one. They are perfect and we are sinful. They are faithful and we, often, are weak in faith or even faithless. They are pain-free and we suffer. They enjoy heaven and we are stuck on earth. The more we think about it, the more we may become resentful of that multitude. They seem so much better than us. They make us look bad. Who are these guys anyway?

That's exactly what one of the heavenly elders asks St. John. He says, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" St. John doesn't want to touch that

question so the elder answers it himself, “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.”

These are no strangers to pain and suffering. They have come out of the great tribulation – or suffering – which is life in a sinful world. “Christians of all ages are always suffering tribulations of one kind or another, including persecutions.” (Brighton, p.197) These are no softies. These are people who have suffered because they lived in a sinful world. They have suffered for the cause of Christ. They have suffered as a consequence of their sin.

Their sin? Aren’t these the holy ones in white robes – so much better and exalted than us? The robes of their lives are white – pure and without sin – not because they were naturally that way or because of anything they did, but because they were washed. “Washed” indicates that they were once dirty. Every one of them was a sinner – sinful by birth and sinful by action. Their lives were foul and filthy until they were washed in the blood of the Lamb Jesus Christ and made clean. Jesus suffered for their sins. Jesus shed His blood to wash them clean. Jesus died to save them from death and hell. Jesus rose to life from the grave to bring them through their graves to this place where they are always in God’s presence; where they are not bothered by hunger or thirst; where they suffer no more pain; and where God wipes away their tears of sadness from their eyes.

Yes, these are saints, but not of their own making. They have been saved by grace through the faith they confessed and lived by while on earth. They have been given the status of sainthood through the work of God and the sacrifice of the Lamb. They confess this for all eternity as they shout with joy and thanksgiving, “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb.”

In their essence and origin, they don’t sound a whole lot different than you or me – sinful human beings that we are. But you and I don’t look a whole lot like them. We are not a huge multitude. There are no white robes and glorified bodies here. There is often very non-saintly behavior exhibited here by us. Our worship and praise is less boisterous and less frequent. Rather than being around the throne of God and of the Lamb, we find other places to gather and other

activities to do. Our faith can be weak, dependent upon our feelings and our surroundings. Faith can even vanish when we don't "feel" right or when things are not going right. In short, we look very ordinary and no different than the atheist down the street. This may lead us to question: who are we really? Are we saints? Or are we just hypocrites who are playing church?

Who are you - really? To the world – and sometimes to yourselves – you appear to be just ordinary people, not heavenly saints. But St. John, who wrote our first text from Revelation, also wrote our epistle reading where he says, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are."

Like the great multitude in our first text, we are sinful human beings whose sin stained lives have been washed in the blood of the Lamb Jesus Christ. We have not always lived saintly lives in thought, word, and deed. However, we are holy and pure in the sight of God by His grace through faith in the perfect life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. The world doesn't notice us as being anything different or special just as it didn't notice Christ as being anything different or special when He was on earth. Yet God declares us to be different for the sake of Christ. "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

In other words, we are saints of God by Christ's work, not our own, right now. We are His dearly beloved children by faith right now. We are future members of that great multitude where we will be like Christ in all of His glory and sing God's praises for all eternity. Want or need will be done away with. Suffering will be gone. And God will wipe away every tear of sadness from your eyes.

So, when we talk about "saints" on All Saints' Day, it is not talk about heavenly saints or earthly saints, as if they were two different groups – one of which is really holy and one which tries to be holy – or two separate groups – one there and one here. As we prayed in the Collect today, "You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places in one holy communion." They are holy and we

are holy – by God’s grace for Christ’s sake. We are not separate, but together. Someone once said that the Church is unique in that one does not lose membership in it by dying.

We are united in worship and praise. The worship of the great multitude around the throne intersects with our worship around the altar when our Lord feeds us with His body and blood in a meal which we call “the holy communion.” For it is here where “angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven” – Colleen, Josephine, Kenneth and all who have gone before us in faith – join with us who are here now in the eternal worship of God and the Lamb.

What joy it is for us, as saints, to receive “a foretaste of the feast to come in the Holy Supper” of our Lord! What encouragement it is to meditate upon the saints who are already enjoying the feast in all of its fullness. What we are now in all of our sin, suffering, and sadness, they once were! What they are in all of their holiness, contentment, and joy, we will become!

The two questions about All Saints’ Day are easily and assuredly answered. Who are “they”? Saints! Who are you? Saints! *Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.*