

"From Tribulation to Triumph"  
Revelation 7:9-17

November 1, 2015

All Saint's Day

It is truly a stunning scenario in our first Scripture reading today for All Saints' Day. St. John is being given a glimpse of heaven when he sees a great group of people. There are too many in the multitude to count. They are from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They are clothed in white robes, waiving palm branches in their hands, and singing the heavenly song of praise which we feebly try to imitate in our liturgy with the Hymn of Praise, "This Is The Feast." What a truly incredible sight it must have been for St. John!

But there is one question about this scene: who are these people? Or, as one of the elders in heaven asked St. John, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" That's a very good question.

Since we live by standards in which achievement is rewarded and failure is punished, we might be tempted to think that this is the great multitude of those who have succeeded – the "super saints." These are the people who had strong faiths which never doubted, but always believed. These are the people who did good deeds that were abundant in number and magnificent in character. These are the people who, according to the Roman Catholic standard for sainthood, performed at least two verifiable miracles during their lives on earth.

Because of their great faith and great good deeds, they must have had great lives on earth, at least that's what some preachers and some churches promise. If you just have enough faith, you won't have any problems. They will vanish as you live the "victorious life." If you are obedient to God, you will be truly blessed. You'll have the desires of your heart – money, possessions, the perfect well paying job, the perfect academic school, the perfect loving family, the perfect growing and thriving church, and so on.

Life in heaven will just be a greater and better version of life on earth. They triumphed in life and triumphed more in death. This is the cherry on the top of a saint's life. That may leave us

looking longingly and wistfully upon this group. We just know that we will not be there because we are not worthy enough to belong to such a group of saints.

We admit to being “poor miserable sinners”. We don’t see our faith moving mountains. In fact, our faith can be shaky. We doubt, fear, and waver. Our lives don’t seem to be filled with many spectacular good deeds. Sometimes it may seem that we are lacking any good works at all. It is, as the prophet says, “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” (Isaiah 64:6) And if that’s how our righteous acts appear to God, imagine how our sinful acts appear to Him.

And where is that victorious life we hear so much about? There seems to be more tribulation than triumph in our every day lives. We suffer much on a daily basis. We suffer the inner conflict between good and evil; faith and doubt; encouragements to do good and temptations to do bad; the new man given to us in Holy Baptism who desires to do good and the old man with whom we were born who desires to do evil.

We suffer the rejection, even persecution, of our faith and of Biblical morality. The Christian faith is being squeezed out of the public square and relegated to private practice in homes and churches only. God’s Law and the way of living it produces is not only rejected but, in many cases, hated and fought against. And we who hold that faith and promote that way of living suffer for it.

We suffer for living in a world corrupted by sin. There are natural disasters – floods, fires, famines, hurricanes, blizzards, tornados, and earthquakes. There are societal problems – poverty, crime, hatred, discrimination, and so on. And, of course, there is aging, sickness, pain, and death. And we suffer.

All of these various tribulations point to and are part of the great tribulation immediately preceding Jesus’ return. Jesus says, at the end, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” (Matthew 24:29) And many will suffer.

Have we disqualified ourselves from being part of that great multitude because of our sinfulness? Have lives more full of tribulation than triumph shown that something is wrong with us and that we are not worthy of joining that group? Not at all.

Getting back to the original question, the elder asks, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” And then he answers his own question, “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.”

You see, there are no saints who are holy in and of themselves and have merited the robes of a righteous life by not sinning. There are only saints who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, shed on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. There is no “victorious life” that validates your faith or proves you are a good Christian. Tribulation and suffering have always been the marks of the Christian life and will always be so. Suffering for the faith and obedience to the Word of God is more likely to show your faithfulness, rather than your lack of faithfulness..

The people – the saints – in this great multitude are not super Christians. They are ordinary people like you and me. They are us. We are them. They were sinners and we are sinners, too. But just as they “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb so, too, have the robes of our lives been washed in the blood of the Lamb Jesus Christ.

God sent His Son, Jesus, to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the perfect and all sufficient sacrifice for sin. He died on the cross, shedding His blood as the payment for and cleansing of sin. Our sinful nature rejected such a cleansing as unnecessary. But then the Holy Spirit began to work on us. As Luther’s explanation to the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the Creed says, “The Holy Spirit has called [us] by the Gospel, enlightened [us] with his gifts, sanctified and kept [us] in the one true faith.”

Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit called us to faith in Jesus Christ and what He had done for us. The Holy Spirit enlightened us with His gifts – the Word of God and the Sacraments. Through

faith created by the Holy Spirit and the work of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, we are sanctified in the eyes of God and kept in the one true faith.

You are a saint of God, not by your own work or worthiness, but by God's declaration and the work of the Holy Spirit within you. You are no longer in the filthy black rags of your sinful nature. You have clothed yourselves with Christ at your baptism and are now clothed with holy white robes of Christ's own holiness.

You don't live the "victorious life" of pseudo-saints in which there is no trouble or suffering but only earthly success or pleasure. You live the lives of true saints which Jesus describes in our Gospel: full of poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, persecution, rejection, and slander. It is a tough road to hoe, no doubt about it. But the destination makes it all worthwhile.

By God's grace, you, too, will come out of the great tribulation of this world and join the great multitude of people from every tribe, people, and language. You will be clothed in the white robes of your imputed holiness and will be clutching the palm branches of victory. What a day that will be!

You will be in the direct presence of God and the Lamb. You will worship and serve the Lord day and night in His temple. What a joy that will be for us who have experienced His presence only indirectly through means.

There will be no more evil. As a result, there will be no more struggle with temptation and sin. You won't have to fight that battle any longer. There is only holiness and good. It also means there will be no more misery: no more hunger or thirst; no more suffering or pain. The Lamb, Jesus Christ, will be our shepherd and lead us to springs of living water. All disappointment, sadness, and mourning will be but a distant memory as God Himself will personally wipe away every tear from every one of your eyes.

Rather than looking at this scene in heaven with envy and sadness because of your less than perfect faith and your less than saintly life which you fear disqualifies you from the multitude of saints, see it as a preview of your future life for which God has qualified you by the gift of faith and holiness which Jesus has earned for you by His shed blood and the Holy Spirit has given you through the

Word and Sacraments. Despite how we feel about ourselves and the world around us, we are truly moving from tribulation to triumph. Amen