

Saints Alive!
Revelation 7:9-17
November 1, 2020

Today is All Saints Day, or All Hallows Day, or the Feast of the Saints Day! The church has celebrated this day in honour of the saints who have died. It is the church's celebration in honor of all the saints from Christian history. It is based on the conviction that there is a spiritual connection between those in heaven and on earth. But the question is, how does one qualify to be a saint?

Our reading today from Revelation points us to another dimension that John opens for the readers. In the development of the letter chapter seven is in a holding pattern between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. He shows us the scene in heaven. A great multitude from every nation and language stands before the Lamb. They are one voice: ***Salvation belongs to our God...and to the Lamb.*** Then a question is asked: ***Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?*** And the answer is that they are the saints who have emerged from the great tribulation, and who have been made pure in the blood of the lamb. In short, they are the redeemed of the Lord.

What is a saint? When you read Paul's letters it is noteworthy how often he opens his salutation with an address to the saints. For example, in our Philippians study we read his opening words: ***Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints who are in Philippi.*** To Rome he says: ***To all the beloved in Rome who are called to be saints.*** He uses the same words to describe the Christians in Corinth, to the Colossians, and similar language to the Christians in Thessalonica. Saints are people, not perfect, not always in line for a pope's commendation, but people who have been called, forgiven, and deeply committed to following Jesus.

I think of passage in Graham Green's novel, ***The Power and the Glory***, which addresses this question of sainthood. The main character in the novel is the whisky priest whose life has been anything but saintly. An alcoholic, a coward, a failure, and yet a faithful priest who longed to be a good priest and who took his sacramental role very seriously. Sitting in his cell awaiting execution he laments his wasted life. He is afraid of judgment. Above all he felt a huge disappointment that he was going to God empty handed. He had nothing to show for his life. And then he thinks to himself:

...that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted-to be a saint.

Being a saint, I would suggest, is simply to be forgiven by grace. In his book **Soul Survivor**, Philip Yancey looks at two Russian novelists who are two men who couldn't be more different. **Tolstoy** spent much of his life trying desperately to keep to the principals of the Sermon on the Mount. He did everything he could to follow Jesus' teaching. Tolstoy never seemed to discover the wonder of grace and forgiveness. Rather he became obsessed by his failures to live up to the demands of Christ. **Dostoevsky**, on the other hand, lived out his life profoundly aware of God's grace and forgiveness. No tortured soul here it would seem, but rather a man who lived a rather undisciplined life. Somewhere in-between, I suspect, is the place for us to live. Discipline, yes, but not at the expense of our wonder and delight in God's grace toward us as fallen sinners. It is for this reason, Jesus reminds us, that I came into the world. Not for the righteous did I come, but rather for sinners.

The fundamental question for us on this All Saints Sunday is who is qualified as a saint? The apocalyptic portrait of the other dimension that John provides in Revelation chapter 7 tells us that these folks in white garments before the throne of God are people like you and me. Like you and me, they are people who are committed to Jesus as their Lord, and are on that basis alone among the saints of heaven. Let's be really clear about this; as the entire message of Jesus and of the New Testament confirms over and over again, we can't save ourselves. Our qualification as saints is not based on our good works, or our moral character, or our membership in a church, but solely by our faith connection to the lamb. The picture tells us that we are there because we have been washed in the blood of the lamb. In John's words:

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. (Revelation 7:14ff)

And our reading from the epistle of John provides further clarification:
Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. (1John 3:2)

Flawed saints, like us, are asked by Jesus to live out our servanthood. We do not stand aloof from our neighbour, as if we are better, more respectable, more pious, and more important. No, rather we live out our lives acutely aware of our dependence on God's grace. From this flows our willingness to follow Christ's servant model. To be a saint is to be a Christian, in touch both, with our fallibility, and with God's gracious acceptance of us in Christ. It has always been about amazing grace that washes us clean before a holy God.

Amen