

The Multitude of All the Saints

Our first reading this morning, in these special lessons for All Saints Sunday, is from the Book of Revelation—which is the record of the vision given to John the Seer when he is in exile, cut off from the rest of the Church, on the island of Patmos. This part of the vision, these verses that we hear read today, tell how John is allowed to see the saints of the future. John writes: “I saw a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands, singing a hymn of praise to God, because they kept striving through the time of ordeal, and now they have come to the place where they will hunger and thirst no more, and nothing will hurt them ever again, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

This is an amazing vision, this vision of the future life and bliss of the saints, this vision of the faithful people who follow the way of Jesus even in difficult and dangerous and hostile times. The vision is very important to John, because it gives him hope at a time when he has very little hope—very little hope for his own life, very little hope for the Church he loves and serves and cares for in the name of Christ. This vision of hope is the “revelation” the book is named after.

You know, we Episcopalians today don’t often pay much attention to the Book of Revelation. I think we tend to feel that it’s too strange, too apocalyptic, too much the province of fundamentalists and End-Times believers, for us to be entirely comfortable with it. But Revelation is a powerful book, and in the midst of all the bizarre end-of-the-world imagery, it says powerful things to us about what it means to stay faithful even in difficult times. And that is certainly something resonates with us today.

Bible scholars and historians say that the Book of Revelation was probably written during a time of persecution against the Church, and John, as the main character of the book, is in exile on Patmos as part of a crackdown against Church leaders. At the time, Christians were a small minority in the teeming religious diversity of the Roman Empire, and in many ways Christians were struggling for their very existence. Roman law granted remarkable religious freedom to the various peoples and nationalities that made up the empire—so long as all they were willing to take part in the official state religion of Rome and the worship of the “Genius of the Emperor.” For religions that worshiped many gods, adding one more god and one more ritual was no big deal; many of the subject peoples of Rome were happy enough to offer their pinch of incense to the Emperor if it meant being able to pursue their own religion the rest of the time without interference. Jews, however, got a special dispensation under Roman law: the Romans had learned from bitter experience that the Jewish religion was fiercely monotheistic; Jews would not burn incense before an image of the emperor, because that was idolatry and the worship of Yahweh did not allow idolatry; and the Jews were willing to rebel and die rather than go against the worship of Yahweh—and the Roman leaders figured it simply wasn’t worth the trouble to force Jews to participate in Roman state religion. So Jews had special religious protections under Roman law. In the very early days of the Church, when Christianity was viewed as a sub-sect of Judaism, Christians were also protected under Roman law. But when Christians and Jews parted company after the destruction of Jerusalem; when synagogue leaders began to denounce Christians, and church preachers and gospel-writers began to denounce Jews; then Christians were kicked out of the synagogues, and their religious protection under Roman law evaporated. Christians were sometimes held in deep suspicion by their neighbors, because they wouldn’t do their civic duty and participate in the worship of the Roman gods, for the good of the state. Sometimes Christian leaders were arrested, or their property was seized, or they were imprisoned, or they were sent into exile. That is the situation John is in at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, and he is praying for the Church, because he is genuinely afraid that the Church might be overwhelmed by the oppressive power of Rome. John believes that Jesus has promised that the Church will never fail; but when John looks around him, it is very hard to know how that promise could possibly come true.

The vision that John is granted, the vision that takes up the whole Book of Revelation, is the Holy Spirit’s answer to John’s prayer: it is a vision that tells him no matter how bad the persecution gets, no matter how powerful Rome seems, in the end Christ will reign, in the end God will bring good out of all the evil and hurt

and pain that people have suffered, in the end those who have been faithful even in difficult times will know a joy and a wholeness and a blessedness far beyond anything they had imagined. John's vision of the saints of the future, this vast multitude of people who are faithful to Jesus even in time of ordeal—that vision is part of the hope the Spirit gives to John, the hope that allows John to keep being faithful himself, the hope that allows John to keep on doing the work God gives him to do. Without the vision of the saints of the future, John would have a hard time keepin' on keepin' on.

And here's the kicker: *The people John sees in his vision are us*. That multitude from every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages, includes *us*. Remember, John was most likely a Greek-speaking Jew, from Asia Minor, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The thought that one day there would be people of Scotch-Irish and German and English and West African and even Cornish ancestry, all gathered together in a church in place called "Virginia" and worshipping God in a language called "English"—that idea would have struck John as extraordinary, as awesome, as visionary. It was beyond John's capacity to imagine; yet the Spirit gave it to him to envision, as the Spirit gives it to us to live. We are the saints of the future John sees. John's future is our present—and it is our future, too.

Because we are clearly not fully there yet. We are not yet gathered into Christ's reign; we are not yet clothed in white robes and waving palm branches of victory, like Michael is in our window; we are not yet protected from every hurt, with every tear wiped from our eyes. As it says in our Epistle today, "we are God's children now, but what we will be has not yet been revealed." We too, like John, have a lot of striving yet to do. We don't suffer from state oppression the way John did; we don't have to offer a pinch of incense to the emperor or suffer the consequences. But it is still a struggle for us to bear witness to peace and justice, according to the Way of Jesus, in a world marred by conspicuous consumption and violence and terrorism and prejudice and financial collapse and marketeering greed. It is still a struggle for us to live lives that acknowledge their poverty of spirit, lives that hunger and thirst for righteousness, lives that mourn the suffering of the world, lives that are pure of heart, lives that make peace, in a popular culture that preaches "Look out for Number One" and "Grab what you can before somebody else gets it" and "It's only wrong if you get caught." It is a struggle for us to be the people of Jesus Christ for the world, when for a lot of the world "Jesus Christ" is a curse, the thing you say when you're too angry to say anything else. We're not in exile like John; but it can still feel like we're swimming upstream against the cultural tide when we strive to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to persevere in resisting evil, to proclaim good news in word and example, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace. Those high ideals of our Baptismal Covenant don't just come automatically; we have to work at them; and we have to work at remembering we don't do all those things on our own, but we do them and can *only* do them with God's help. We are the saints of the future John saw, we are God's children now—but we are still striving to grow into the fullness of that vision for ourselves and for everyone around us.

And that's why John's vision still speaks to us today. Because we today still need the encouragement and strength and hope that comes from a vision that says all our striving and struggling will not be in vain, that no matter how crazy or destructive or disintegrating the prevailing culture seems to become, in the end Christ will reign, in the end God will bring good out of all the evil and hurt and pain that people have suffered, in the end those who have been faithful even in difficult times will know a joy and a wholeness and a blessedness far beyond anything we had imagined. That vision is still good for us today, and it helps to give us the hope we need to keep on keepin' on in our faith.

And that is what All Saints Sunday is really all about. It is not just a celebration of the saints of the past; it is not just a vision of the saints of the future; it is the hope of the saints of the present, you and me, here and now, being the faithful people John envisioned we would be, striving to live Jesus' Way of justice and peace and compassion even in times of ordeal, sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and living as Christ's own for ever.

That's the Good News we celebrate today; and that is the promise of God that makes us saints for every day. Amen.