

## Sermon for November 6, 2016

### All Saints Sunday

#### "Who are These?"

##### Revelation 7:9-17

"Who are these clothed in white robes and from where have they come?" The question was being asked by one of the heavenly elders who spent eternity praising God and gazing upon the sights of heaven. The one expected to answer was John, a believer who had been lifted into heaven to be shown things that revealed God's plan for all of creation in a brilliant revelation and then to relate what he saw in a book which we call simply Revelation.

I am sure that John thought the questioner was crazy. After all who was he to know who these people in heaven were and where they came from? You see John did not know much of beautiful white robes. All he knew about was the drab garb of a prisoner. Before he was lifted into heaven, he was on a prison island, Patmos. He had been thrown in prison for preaching the gospel. John was also not well acquainted with heavenly things. John was worried about some very earthly matters. Matters like how to stay alive. Surely he cared about heavenly things; he was a Christian after all, but he was more acquainted with the horrors of this world than with the glories of the next. He was in prison, but other Christians did not fare as well as John. They had been fed to the lions by Nero and other emperors. His brothers and sisters in Christ were being slain by gladiators for the emperor's entertainment, or they were placed on poles and lit ablaze and used as human torches to light the games. John had an in-depth knowledge of prison islands and hungry lions, but white robed heavenly choirs were not his forte. The one asking the question was more likely to know.

So, John turned the question back to the elder and said "Sir you know. Who are these?"

This is probably what the Elder had been waiting for. So, the Elder said to him, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them pure in the blood of the lamb." These were the Christians, and Jews before them, who had been faithful to God in times of trouble. They included those sisters and brothers of John who had been fed to the lions or slain by gladiators because of their faith. But that is not all. Not only had they come through the tribulation but they had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. In other words, through those times of trouble they had trusted in Christ and he was the one who had seen them through it into eternal life.

In many ways, John and his Christian brothers and sisters were those people, or he would soon be. Like those robed in white they were going through a time of trouble, and like them John's friends were trusting in Christ for salvation. In this vision God was showing John what would happen to his brothers and sisters who were suffering for Christ. God was also showing John what would happen to him. They had suffering in this life because they had wanted to proclaim that Christ was King and praise the name of Jesus. But in the next life all that had turned around and they were standing before the very throne of God and they were shouting "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb." In this life, they had wept for the lives of their loved ones and were hungry and in prison, but in the next life all that was changed. In the next life, they

shall not hunger, neither thirst anymore, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Just hours before John was on a prison island where he was probably put to forced labor in the hot sun to earn his bread, and now the elder said, "these, who are like you, shall hunger no more, and the sun shall not strike them, nor the scorching heat."

The book of Revelation is often misunderstood. That misunderstanding is not helped by its depiction in popular media. Often people try to make it into a blueprint or timetable for the last days. The most famous of these is the system devised by John Darby who dreamed the rapture among other things. These are all flawed because they try to impose 19<sup>th</sup> century rationalism upon a document that is primarily poetic and metaphorical in its nature. Sir Isaac Newton said, "The folly of Interpreters has been, to foretell times and things by this Prophecy, as if God designed to make them Prophets. By this rashness they have not only exposed themselves, but brought the Prophecy also into contempt."

Revelation is often misused and misrepresented. It is really a message of hope given to the church in the midst of persecution. As the early church was being persecuted this book gave them hope that in the end good would win out. As Christians were being taken off to prison, like John the narrator of the book, or killed for practicing their faith, it seemed that evil had triumphed. Revelation told them to stand firm because in the end good would prevail.

In particular, this passage we read which describes the choir robed in white was a part of that message of hope. Robes in the Bible often represent righteousness. These choir members are clothed in the righteousness of Christ: forgiveness and grace. The fact that it is a choir reassured them that their voices would not be silenced even in death.

So please put aside all your preconceptions about the Book for Revelation and see this passage for what it was intended to be. A message of hope to the living that those who had been martyred lived on. A message of hope in the midst of trials and troubles. A message that no matter how bad things got, God was with them and was caring for them.

Today is commonly called All Saints Sunday and it is a time when churches all over the world celebrate those who have gone on to glory. But when you talk of saints, many people ask, "Who are these?" They are the ones who have washed their robes white in the blood of the lamb. The saints are people like John who have trusted in Christ to be their salvation. They are people who have been through times of trouble because of their faith and have trusted God unto eternal life. They are martyrs, and people of the Bible. But they are also the people who have trusted Christ to see them through whatever troubles come their way. They are people of faith whom many of us can name in our hearts who have gone on to glory. People like those we remembered today from our community.

There are times of trouble coming. I am not just talking about some apocalyptic tribulation. I am also referring to the many troubles of this life. Some people are called to suffer as the early Christian martyrs did or as Christians still do in some countries. And some of us are only called to suffer through the tribulation of trying to live out the love of God in a hateful world. But none of us knows which we are. We must always be ready to trust God to see us through any trouble.

Then when we enter times of trouble, God will see us through them and we can join the ranks of those who stand before the throne shouting "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the lamb forever."