

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of November 1, 2009*

## It is Good to See Our Dead and Our Living (Revelation 7:9-17)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for today's homily is from the seventh chapter of Revelation. Our Lord says to us:

"I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"."

This is the Word of God.

Dear saints in Christ, Grief councillors tell us that we need to see our dead. This may sound somewhat bleak but there is something to this. When loved ones die we are told that attending the visitation, seeing the person in the casket, in the grave, attending the funeral, and seeing the burial helps give us closure and helps us heal. It is part of the grief process. On this All Saints' Day we have no open caskets, no grave sights to visit. Instead, we remember and we give thanks to God for His saints.

Here in our text we have a vision of the church triumphant, the saints in heaven before the throne of God singing His praises. It is a vision of their victory and celebration. Now when most people hear the word 'saint' they normally think of someone with unusually great faith, who have perhaps done extraordinary miracles; most people think of the prophets and the apostles; St. Paul, St. Peter, and the Virgin Mary and so on. We tend to think of these figures as larger than life. People tend to use the term, 'saint' for another category of Christian, almost superhuman. We tend to say things like, 'Oh no, I'm not perfect, I'm no saint.' And yet in God's eyes, the saints include everyone who trusts in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. His bloody sacrifice has made us clean before God.

Now, generally we have trouble talking about sacrifice and death and things of this sort. We are not comfortable with the idea of death. We don't like to look at death. It reminds us of our mortality. People die everyday and while we know that death will eventually come our way, when it happens to someone we know somehow it always takes us by surprise.

Many of the saints in the past were martyrs. Their blood was shed because of their belief in Jesus as the Christ. Two of these martyrs were Lutheran. Their names were Henry Vos and John van den Eschen. They were from the Netherlands. They had come to Wittenberg to study theology and prepare for the ministry. They were recent seminary graduates and trained by Luther himself. Upon graduation they were called and sent to preach the Gospel in their home districts. They were full of vigour and faith and zeal for

Christ. However, before they could make it back to the Netherlands they tragically met their fate on July 1st of 1523. On that day in Brussels they were arrested, tried and convicted as heretics and they were burned at the stake for the sake of the Gospel. Luther considered them martyrs and wrote a hymn in memory of their faithful witness. This hymn was published in the first Wittenberg hymnbook and Lutherans sang about their deaths and lives and the hope of the resurrection.

These were just two of the saints we remember this day. Some saints such as these died as martyrs and many more died in a more normal way by natural causes. Some people elevate the saints to an unhealthy degree. They even pray to them as though they are part of a pantheon of gods from Greek mythology. And yet, the purpose of All Saints' Day is not to simply honour and give a tribute to the saints. Our focus is not on what the saints have done for God but on what God has done for His saints and for all of us.

Today we are confronted by death and yet life as well – the death of the saints and their life after death. We have said that seeing a loved one who has died helps give us a sense of closure and healing. On this day we can find the ultimate healing, the ultimate sense of completion. As we reflect on the death of Jesus and His payment for our sin we celebrate the life He has given us. In his first letter to the Corinthian Christians St. Paul wrote about Communion as a celebration of Christ and His atoning sacrifice. He said, "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

Now behind the altar here we have a crucifix with a likeness of Jesus as He hung on the cross. Some see this as a gruesome and morbid and rather unnecessary display in the church. Some see it as somehow forgetting about the resurrection of Christ. But rather, the opposite is true. The picture of Christ on the cross is a visible and tangible reminder not only of our sins that put Him there but moreover His victory over sin, His victory over Satan, and the power of death. We "proclaim the Lord's death" as Paul put it because His death is really a victory for us. Without Jesus' death there would be no resurrection or atonement. His death is the very basis of eternal life itself. In other words, death has been defeated and overcome by the Lamb's death and resurrection.

The vision of heaven in this passage in Revelation shows the saints in glory. And by the blood of the Lamb who has cleansed us in our Baptism He calls us saints too here and now. However, we are also sinners. We are saint and sinner at the same time – saints forgiven in Christ and sanctified by His Word and Baptism and sinners in thought, word and deed. We struggle with our sins don't we - with our sinful nature on a daily basis. And it is not a pleasant struggle is it - in fact, all the misery and all the death in this world is a consequence of sin. As Romans says, "The wages of sin is death."

But God sees us in our sin and misery and He has mercy. God wants to be in communion with us, to be with Him in His presence. This is why He sent His Son, the Lamb from His heavenly throne to save sinners from death. And when we commemorate the death of saints we moreover commemorate the death of Jesus

Christ, the Lamb who has cleansed us and brought us peace and into a relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Yes, Grief councillors tells us that we need to see our dead. It is good for us. And God's Word also tells us that we need to see our dead. In His revelation God gives us a brief vision of eternity, what He will do and has done for us. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" It is His work of grace. All praise be to Him!

The saints lay their crowns of glory before the throne and say, "“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” The One who deserves the crown is our Redeemer but He has shown mercy and He gives us a crown of life to share with Him. The Lamb presents us holy and blameless before God where we remain in communion with Him. Our robes have been purified by His love and grace.

As our Good Shepherd Jesus is leading us out of this great tribulation day by day, calling and guiding us with His Word. So let us keep our eyes and our thoughts fixed on Him. For when we see His death and resurrection we see our very life - we see the hope for eternal glory where we with the whole company of heaven will sing His praises with Hallelujahs forevermore. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.