

Sunday 5th November 2017

All Saints' Sunday

Gold or White



Collect

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: grant us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Revelation 7:9-17 English Standard Version (ESV)

A Great Multitude from Every Nation

7⁹ After this 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,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?"¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "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."¹⁵ Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

COMMENT: This remarkable passage has influenced images of Heaven from the time John wrote it in the 1st Century AD. Christian Art through the centuries has used this passage as one of its main sources for depicting in stone, glass, paint and ink what we would see when we too joined the faithful in the kingdom of heaven. It has to be noted, however, that this is an apocalyptic vision akin to what psychology defines as a hallucination. Yet it presents a vision of God's eternal presence, which is both profoundly Christ-centred and universal in its scope. Faith in life beyond death presumes that the

redeemed will be ushered into God's presence. The passage consists of a conversation between "one of the elders," and John, the author of the Revelation. It gives details of what John saw in his vision and why the vast multitude from every nation is to gather before the throne of God. In ancient times, a throne was actually a ceremonial chair from which a ruler issued judgments. It was so closely associated with royalty that it became symbolic of kingship. In the Hebrew tradition, the LORD was deemed the supreme monarch and the Messiah vice-regent. Hence, the Lamb is seen standing beside the heavenly throne. We can note the song of victory that the multitude sang celebrating, the martyrs triumphant passage through persecution. They had received the promise that by faith they would share both the conquest of sin and death fully revealed in the cross and the resurrection life with God beyond death. The victory is spiritual, not over the threat of physical death, but the victory of faith over all else that can divide our loyalties. The martyred Christians have successfully fought this fight and found that they have conquered by holding to the central tenet that in Christ crucified lies the whole truth of God. This is the great ordeal through which they have come, having washed their white robes, the symbol of their baptism, in the life-blood of the Lamb. The passage contains many Old Testament images and elements, especially from the Psalms and the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah. That too was characteristic of Revelation. For instance, the song that greeted the Lamb parallels the new song of Psalm 97. Ezekiel 34:23 also describes the Davidic shepherd of Israel as feeding the people of God. In Isaiah 25:8, the prophet of the Exile promised that the LORD would "wipe away tears from all faces." This should not surprise us because even at the end of the 1st century AD, there were only scattered fragments of what we now call our New Testament scriptures. The scriptures of the first Christians were the sacred writings of the Hebrew tradition.

Matthew 5:1-12 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Sermon on the Mount

5¹ Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

The Beatitudes

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons^[a] of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Footnotes: a. Greek *huios*; in this passage, this refers to both male and females.

COMMENT The Beatitudes reveal how Jesus saw those who are to inherit the Kingdom of heaven. While this description may seem to project beyond current reality, it also provides a value system for a basis on how we can live from day to day as if the reign of God has already begun. This is the way of life lived by the saints now and eternally. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is a collection of sayings Jesus may have uttered at different times and places, rather than delivered all at once in a single discourse. The Beatitudes summarise the values intended to guide those seeking to follow Jesus. Each one is a sermon in itself, and the whole passage has generated many a sermon series. Beatitudes appear in the Old Testament according to a single pattern beginning with the Hebrew word 'esher' (blessed or happy) after which they usually described someone worthy of praise (e.g. Psalm 1:1; 2:12; Proverbs 8:34; Isaiah 56:2; Daniel 12:12). Matthew quoted Jesus using the same method and adding the reason for this happy state. Apart from Matthew and Luke where the formula appears most commonly, beatitudes occur seven times in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7,14), three times in Paul's Letter to the Romans (4:7-8; 14:22), and once in John (20:29). The reign of God comes, the beatitudes insist, not by implementing human schemes of moral and social improvement, but by the gift of God. Another feature is the paradoxical quality of the beatitudes. The people identified are not supposed to be happy - the poor, the mourners, the persecuted. Many martyred witnesses to the faith went to their death believing that a vastly better life awaited them in the heavenly realm. Yet the message of the beatitudes is not exclusively for a distant future, rather, it is for the present. The words were spoken to generate trust in God in difficult circumstances, not simply to enable us to endure hard times. None of us can avoid the traumatic experiences that life so frequently presents. The challenge of Christian faith is to accept and live a sustaining relationship with God in the most trying circumstances. This was never more true than at this moment when in Africa and Asia millions of our fellow human beings suffer disease, privation and the effects of war and natural disasters we have never experienced let alone imagined. Members of a rural Jamaican congregation which had experienced much privation due to marketing issues, crop failures and devastating hurricanes spoke of how much they had been blessed, not of the poverty they struggled to escape. The beatitudes define the way that Jesus himself lived to the point of death as an unjustly condemned criminal. Such spiritual power comes not through our most noble human efforts, but through the gift of God.

Psalm 34 *Benedicam Dominum*

℟ I will bless the Lord at all times.

¹ *Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.*

² I will bless the Lord at all times,
his praise always on my lips;

³ in the Lord my soul shall make its boast.

The humble shall hear and be glad. **℟**

⁴ Glorify the Lord with me.

Together let us praise his name.

⁵ I sought the Lord and he answered me;

from all my terrors he set me free. **℟**

⁶ Look towards him and be radiant;
let your faces not be abashed.

⁷ This poor man called, the Lord heard him
and rescued him from all his distress. **R**

⁸ The angel of the Lord is encamped
around those who revere him, to rescue them.

⁹ Taste and see that the Lord is good.
He is happy who seeks refuge in him.

R I will bless the Lord at all times.

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son :
and to the Holy Ghost;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be :
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: This psalm declares trust in God to provide all the answers to life's great questions. Emphasis placed on humility (verse 3), gets lost amid repeated summonses to praise (verses 2,4,9) and reassurances that God does answer prayer (verses 4-6). Nonetheless, the caveat remains that only the righteous can have such a relationship with the LORD. An angel encamped around those who fear The LORD recalls the frequently used military name for The LORD, "the Lord of hosts". The epithet occurs no less than 267 times. It variously referred to angelic bodies gathered in The LORD's name to defend Israel or to the army of Israel itself. Although the superscript suggests that it was of Davidic origin, this is not so. The psalm belongs to a limited set using the acrostic format where each line begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which came into use late in the literary history of Israel. It was designed as a pedagogic practice to aid memorization or to give complete expression to an idea or emotion. No question can be raised about the religious fervour of the psalmist in using this poetic style. Christians have frequently made use of verse 4 as a call to worship.

Short Preface

And now we give you thanks for the glorious pledge of the hope of our calling which you have given us in your saints; that, following their example and strengthened by their fellowship, we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us, and with them receive the unfading crown of glory.

Post Communion

God, the source of all holiness and giver of all good things: may we who have shared at this table as strangers and pilgrims here on earth be welcomed with all your saints to the heavenly feast on the day of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The Blessing

Christ our King make you faithful and strong to do his will, that you may reign with him in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**