

Revelation 7: 9-17 Communion of Saints

The Second Reading for this All Saints Sunday is Revelation 7: 9-17, from the last book in the New Testament. The writer, a certain John, begins by saying here is the apocalypse, that means revelation, of Jesus Christ. Now Apocalypse is a literary genre that uses strong, strange, symbolic images to get a message across rather than narrative. We've been following the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that is the Good News of Jesus Christ, told through parables and discourses, as Jesus spoke to the crowds, taught his disciples, and engaged the hostile religious leaders. We now need to adjust our listening ears and rub our eyes to get ready to receive the Revelation of Jesus Christ, penned down by John, because it doesn't come to us as stories to be explained but as a vision to be experienced. So, take a deep breath and tune in with your imagination.

At the beginning, John introduces himself to the 7 churches to which he is writing. "I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." As he writes, he's exiled there under the Roman empire for being the witness to Jesus Christ whom they had crucified. This revelation comes to us from someone who has been persecuted and is going through an ordeal for standing firm as a witness to the word of God, Jesus Christ.

John then tells the readers that he's been told to write down what he hears and sees.... Before he gets to today's passage, what he saw was not just the vision of the future but also of the past history. The terrible ordeal he himself and others have lived through. Hear now, the passage from the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

After this I looked, and there was 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. 10They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' 11And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, 12singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ 14I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘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.

15 For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within God’s temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

In human history, the sides to all conflicts have names: the Axis against the Allies in the World War II, Russia against Ukraine, Hamas against Israel. It’s incredibly sad, isn’t it, that we can so easily name examples of war just from our own life-time.

Once a group of people with power (not even a nation) resorts to the weapon of violence and use it against another, for whatever justifiable reason in their minds, all too often we are incapable of stopping ourselves from spiraling down the path of violence, destruction and death, regardless of who the instigator was; we become trapped in the place where more violence is deemed necessary to prevent further violence and death.

It would be easy and convenient to place the guilt solely on the instigator, but the reality of war is rarely that simple. Once we’re caught up in it, the best we can do, or the most we seem willing to do, is to try to avoid destroying the innocent lives, of which we have also proved ourselves to be incapable. Such is the way of the world, from time immemorial. It is a beast and John the writer of Revelation gives it the name of Babylon, the empire who took Israel captive, but the name of the beast for John in his “real time” was actually Rome, the empire that crucified Jesus. We have seen many a name for the beast since, down to this present time we are living in. And “God is not unaware of what the oppressors do.”¹

So, what is remarkable about today’s passage from Revelation is that, following the images of violence and destruction and death, it introduces a great multitude from every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages. Surely, they must have been from places that were in

¹ According to CNN, a Palestinian woman in Israel was arrested by Israeli police for posting this line from Quran on social media.

conflict with one another? What unites them? What do they share in common? What brought them together?

One of the elders who was part of the divine court introduced at the beginning of the book appears to John and asks 2 critical questions. “Who are they?” and “Where do they come from?” There is something about the way he asks that reminds me of a teacher who asks a question to the classroom in order to bring students’ attention to focus, because the answer to the question is what they really need to know.

The elder gives John the answer: First, who are they? They are those who have come out of great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made white in the blood of the Lamb.” What does that tell us about who they are? Today, when we hear the expression like “washed by the blood of Jesus,” we might quickly think of “forgiveness of sin,” but here, washing their robe, that is something they put on, with the blood of the Lamb, is about taking on the ministry of Christ who shed the blood, for loving the world who did not recognize him for the savior that he was.

Who are they? They are the ones who suffered, and even died, for being the witness to the radical love of Jesus for the world. Now they stand before him, worshipping God day and night.

Second question, where do they come from? They are from anywhere and everywhere; they come from wherever they endured ordeal for being the witness to the way of Christ, the way of love, mercy and justice in the violent world, over and against the narrative of death and destruction that ruled their world. Specific nationality or membership in religious group is not what defines them but their resistance to the culture of the beast, the empire of their day. Today, they’d be from Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Palestine, all holding the branches of palm in their hands and proclaiming, “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb.”

Witnessing against the beast and espousing the way of the Lamb, mean inclusion in that great multitude. “All Saints” means that. Interestingly, in this passage, the name of Jesus is not mentioned, but rather the figure of the Lamb prevails. The great multitude includes many who never “named the name” of Jesus but who lived lives that continued in the way of the Lamb:

And that is the Communion of Saints, from time immemorial to this day, and John, the one who wrote down all that’s in the book of Revelation, is one of them. For he, too, suffered ordeal and yet remained steadfast in his bearing witness to the Word of God and to the Lamb.

And you know what? We, too, are called to live lives that bears witness to the way of the Lamb, to us Jesus the Christ in our own day and resist the power of evil and oppose the forces of violence, destruction and death in whatever form.

The crowd sings with a great voice of God's saving power. The crowd who shouted Hosannah and waved palm branches as Jesus entered Jerusalem later turned against him, the shout of Hosannah turning into the shout to "crucify him." But here, the crowd will not turn away from the Lamb. They are the children of God who remained close to God the parent, or, if gone astray, followed their way back to God. They did not follow the way of the world but resisted the logic of power and domination by force, whatever the expression it found in the time and place they lived.

It is this great bunch of saints with whom we are to be in Communion, as the living witness to the love of God who shelters the oppressed and the weak, doing what we can to resist the way of violence and destruction. Doing what we can to reach out and touch and heal the wounded and brokenhearted; in short, to obey God's law which Jesus summarized: love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. It is so simple, perhaps too simple to be taken seriously by the leaders of our complicated world. It is so simple, yet so much more difficult than resorting to violence.

The book of Revelation bears witness to aspects of our world that we fear, the harrowing reality we'd rather not see nor be reminded of. What does it look like for you and me, living in this world as is today, not to embrace the master narrative of violence and destruction as inevitable, but to insist on the way of the Lamb. It sure is hard, but we are not alone; a great multitude is with us.

The book of Revelation also reveals to us the vision of God who is, who was, and who is to come, and God's vision includes the great multitude who lived faithful lives witnessing to the way of the Lamb. As we come together to worship, we join them. As we share in the feast at the Lord's Table, we join them.

This is the Good News of Jesus Christ in the Revelation of Jesus Christ: "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb who will guide us to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes." Amen.