

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
5327 W. Washington Blvd.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

All Saints' Day  
November 1, 2009  
Revelation 7:9-17

## *"Quite a Crowd"*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

### Introduction

This afternoon, about 70,000 people will be gathered for a little athletic contest up in Green Bay. One would be hard pressed to think of a more highly anticipated event. With either dread or curiosity or hope, that crowd will be eagerly awaiting the appearance of the one about whom in these last weeks more words have been spoken and written than could be imagined. It will be quite a crowd. Now that we have gotten that out of the way, let's go from the ridiculous to the sublime. This (tomorrow) is All Saints' Day. The first reading gives us the opportunity to think about another crowd, the gathering of the saints standing before the throne and the Lamb. As we consider that crowd, may we find comfort and assurance in the reason they are gathered and also that we are in reality part of that assembly. May the Holy Spirit bless our consideration of His holy Word this day.

#### I. It is a multitude

In the history of the church, it must be admitted that the observance of All Saints' Day for quite some time was filled with abuses. And part of the reason for that was that the church was emphasizing the limited number of the saints. Only certain individuals were considered "saints"—holy ones. They would be people of exceptional merit and holiness, for example: the apostles and martyrs. And in emphasizing that rather limited group of individuals the church also brought in the idea of the treasury of the saints, the relics, and sale of indulgences. As we heard last week, the Castle Church in Wittenberg, which was also known as "All Saints' Church" had a very impressively large collection of relics. And it was for this very reason that Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the doors of that church to question the validity of that practice. We celebrated Reformation last week (though in actuality yesterday was [this evening is] Reformation Day. We can observe All Saints' Day in that light. The Scripture readings that we heard read before remind us that the saints are more than just a chosen few. Indeed, the saints comprise quite a crowd.

In the verses immediately before the first reading, in the vision of John in the book of Revelation, he sees what appears to be a limited number of servants of the Lord, sealed on their foreheads. The number was 144,000—12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel. Now that seems like a limited number. In fact, some sects have placed great emphasis on the 144,000 and try to explain how you become a member of that group. But the symbolism of the numbers would suggest rather that this is a number suggesting completeness— $12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$ . The number of the Old Testament church times the number of the New Testament church times the number of completeness three times.

And the words that are our text would certainly confirm that idea. It is a multitude. "After this I looked, and behold a great multitude that no one could number, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." It is a heavenly vision of glorious power. It is quite a crowd. It is the saints of God in glory.

## II. The Crowd Victorious in Christ

And the vision continues. The multitude sings a song of victory. They are clothed in white robes and they hold palm branches, symbols of victory in their hands. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And the song is taken up by the rest of the host of heaven including the angels of God, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen!"

This beautiful vision leads to a question from one of the elders to John, "Who are these clothed in white robes and from where have they come?" John replies, "Sir, you know." And the elder says, "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. Therefore they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple ..."

Here is a beautiful picture of the reason that there are saints at all. The multitude is clothed in robes made white by the blood of the Lamb. They are washed in the blood of the Lamb. Now this is a paradox. Washing something in blood does not make it clean. But the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sins. We cannot attain sainthood by our own actions or works. It is the work of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. It is the blessing of salvation in him. And as the text concludes: "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." There is the hope of salvation and the hope.

## III. We are part of the Multitude

And in these words is also the reminder that we as God's people are members with the saints. Indeed, we are part of that multitude. A recent commentary puts it very, "Because John's vision includes the faithful from every nation and every time, it is appropriate to see those who yet live faithfully here on earth as part of that gathering. ... When Christians gather for worship in this world, they may be understood as participating by faith in the ongoing heavenly praise." (Lutheran Study Bible, p. 2211) Have you ever considered that your gathering in worship with your fellow Christians is a gathering from out of the great tribulation? It is only for a brief time, but we are called together as God's people, as His saints. And in the midst of the trials of this world, whether we see them in the stresses and difficulties of our lives, in sickness and sorrows, or in the realization that sin and evil and temptation appear to be overwhelming the world around us and even in our own lives, we need to be assured of the victory of the Lamb of the love of God. In the epistle for this day, St. John also writes: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God;

and so we are." May we never forget that we are his saints.

### Conclusion

In just a little over three weeks, there have been four funerals in this church. Four celebrations of the victory of the saints in Jesus Christ. Four faithful women called to eternal life. Here is a very real reminder of the fact that the church triumphant grows one by one and that we are assured of that victory. This past week I was with a gathering of several other pastors and one of them made the comment, "You know it should really be comforting to all of us that as every year goes by we know more and more of the saints above." And how very true that is. Whether it is a loved one close to you or someone you have known all your life or someone who is a member of this church or countless other churches. Passing through death passing into life from the church militant to the church triumphant and is numbered with the saints. But we are numbered there as well by the grace and mercy of God, we too are part of that multitude that no one can count of every tribe and nation and language. We too are part of the blessed company of the saints.

Unnumbered choirs before the shining throne  
Their joyful anthems raise  
Till heaven's arches echo with the tone  
Of that great hymn of praise.  
And all its host rejoices,  
And all it blessed throng  
Unite their myriad voices  
In one eternal song.

In Jesus' name. Amen.