

All Saints Day

(Year A)

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>First Reading</i> | Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 |
| <i>Response</i> | Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 24:1BC-2, 3-4AB, 5-6 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | 1 John 3:1-3 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | Matthew 5:1-12A |

Today the Church celebrates the great solemnity, the feast of All Saints. On November 1 every year, this is an ancient feast that commemorates all the saints in Heaven—all the ones that are presently in Heaven, especially the unknown saints. So we have lots of feasts throughout the year where we commemorate this or that saint, this or that pope that we know their names, we know their life, we know their witness...but this is a feast celebrating all of the saints in Heaven.

And on this day, the Church gives us some very fascinating readings. And in contrast to my usual practice, I'm going to focus today more on the first reading, which is from the book of Revelation, than I will on the Gospel. As you'll see, the Gospel for today is the Beatitudes, which we dealt with elsewhere. We read it during year A as we work through the Gospel of Matthew. But we don't always get to read the book of Revelation, so I want to start not with the Gospel this time, but I want to start with the reading from the book of Revelation and ask ourselves: What is this describing? And why does the Church give it to us on the feast of All Saints?

So the passage for today is from Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14. And it's John's vision of the 144,000 chosen and the innumerable multitude—very mysterious vision of those who will be saved. So let's look at what he has to say, and we'll see if we can kind of unpack it and then figure out why the Church is giving us this passage from the book of Revelation...and then how it leads into the psalm and the Gospel for

today. Alright, so we'll start with the first reading from Revelation 7. John says this:

Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads." And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel...

Now at this point, the lectionary skips over verses 5-8, but what John basically does is...I'll just read it to you. He says:

...twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand of the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand of the tribe of Gad, twelve thousand of the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand of the tribe of Naph'tali, twelve thousand of the tribe of Manas'seh, twelve thousand of the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand of the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand of the tribe of Is'sachar, twelve thousand of the tribe of Zeb'ulun, twelve thousand of the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Benjamin.

So what he does is he just lists twelve thousand from each of the tribes, and then he picks up in verse 9 and says:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, 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 upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and they worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”¹

Alright, stop there. Very mysterious, very powerful, very fascinating vision of John from the book of Revelation. So, two questions. What is John describing? And why does the Church pick this passage for All Saints Day? So let’s work through those in order.

The first point is that John here in his vision is having a vision of two groups of the elect, two groups of those who are saved: the 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel and then the innumerable multitude from every nation on Earth. So basically what this is a vision of is a vision of the Church, a vision of those who believe in Christ, who have been saved through Christ, both from Israel and from the nations. It’s the universal Church that represents all the peoples of the Earth.

Now the first part of the vision is the one most people are really fascinated by, because John gives this number. He gives an exact number—the one hundred and forty-four thousand. There’s all kinds of speculation about who are the one hundred and forty-four thousand. Why is that number? What is the meaning of the number? And in this case, the clue to answering that question is something that will happen over and over again in the book of Revelation. If you want to understand the book of Revelation and you find something strange in it—and there’s a lot that’s strange in it—invariably, the key to understanding it is in the Old Testament. You’ve got to go back to the Old Testament. This book alone contains over seven to eight hundred allusions to the Old Testament. So if you read through Revelation, 22 chapters, there are about seven to eight hundred allusions to passages from the Old Testament. In other words, it’s like a tapestry woven of threads all taken from the Old Testament.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So in this case, I'll just pull one thread out so you can kind of see it. When John describes a group of people who have been marked on their foreheads—that's the one hundred and forty-four thousand—he's alluding to a prophecy in the book of Ezekiel 9 that describes the righteous Israelites in the city of Jerusalem, who before the city is destroyed, are going to be marked with a spiritual mark that will protect them from the tribulation that is about to be unleashed on the city of Jerusalem. So if you go back to Ezekiel 9, for example, verses 3-4, this is what you'll find:

Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherubim on which it rested to the threshold of the house...

Pause. That means the glory cloud of God had departed from the temple in the ark of the covenant. So God is abandoning the temple, and the temple is going to be destroyed. Keep going and it says:

...and he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his side. And the Lord said to him, "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it."

So in the book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel has a vision of an angel going throughout the city of Jerusalem and putting a mark on the forehead of all the people who are righteous and who groan over the abominations that are taking place. This is in the 6th century BC, right before the temple is destroyed.

Now, what's interesting there is that when it says "put a mark on the forehead," the actual Hebrew is put a *taw* on the forehead. *Taw* is the letter "t" in Hebrew. And in paleo Hebrew—an ancient form of Hebrew—that was actually shaped like a cross. So he's literally going to put a little sign of the cross, a little "t" on the forehead of each person who's righteous in the city in order to protect them from the destruction that's about to be unleashed *against* the city.

So in other words, the mark on the forehead is a sign of the righteous Israelites who will be saved in the book of Ezekiel. John now has a vision of something similar happening, though, in the new covenant era. The angel is going and now

the tribulation is going to harm the whole Earth. But in this case, the servants of God are going to be sealed upon their foreheads out of all twelve tribes of Israel. So the number one hundred and forty-four thousand is basically a symbolic number for all of those Israelites who will be saved through faith in Christ. In other words, they're going to be marked with the sign of the cross, the sign of faith. And they will constitute what is elsewhere referred to as the remnant of Israel.

So you might remember in the letter to the Romans, for example, chapters 9-11. Paul talks about a mystery, that a hardening of heart has come upon a part of Israel, but there's a remnant that remains through grace. These are people who belong to the tribes of Israel—like Paul himself—but who through grace have accepted Jesus as the Messiah, even though the majority of the Israelites did not accept him as the Messiah.

So here John is talking about the same reality as Paul but using apocalyptic imagery, this vision of the one hundred and forty-four thousand believing Israelites. Now what's fascinating about that—you're still probably wondering, what's the one hundred and forty-four thousand mean? Well, it's a symbolic number, and you can think of it in this way. The twelve tribes of Israel times the twelve apostles times one thousand...which one thousand is a standard number for perfection and plenitude, like the millennium, the thousand years in Revelation 20, is the plenitude of time. It's the fullness of time and brings the completion, the period of the reign of Christ before the unleashing of Satan at the end of the millenium in Revelation 20.

So basically, the one hundred and forty-four thousand represent the plenitude, the fullness, of the number of those Israelites who will believe in Christ and will be saved and be part of the Church. That's the basic idea: twelve times twelve times one thousand. And you'll see this elsewhere in the book of Revelation. For example, John will see twenty-four elders, and it represents the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. Or when he has a vision of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21, there will be twelve foundation stones and twelve gates—twelve representing the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. So for John, the Church is always Israel *and* the apostles together. That's why twenty-four is an important number in the

book of Revelation. And the same thing is happening here with the one hundred and forty-four thousand.

So in other words, the first thing John sees is the remnant of Israel who will be saved. Now I have to say this real quick. I said that it's from twelve tribes, but one of the things people will notice if you read through the list of tribes—this isn't in the lectionary, but if you read through in Revelation—there is one tribe that's missing. And it's the tribe of Dan. So sorry to all you guys out there named Dan, because there's all kinds of speculation about why the tribe of Dan isn't mentioned here.

In the early Church Fathers, one of the traditions was that Dan is not mentioned is because it was believed that the anti-christ would come from the tribe of Dan. So I just throw that out there for all you guys named Dan out there. But you might think, well, wait, how do they get the number twelve? Well, remember, remember, remember, that in ancient Israel, you had the twelve sons of Jacob, but then Joseph has two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who get blessed. And then the tribe of Levi doesn't have any land in the land of Israel. So you subtract Levi and you add in Ephraim and Manasseh, and they kind of take the place of Joseph.

So in some cases, you can describe thirteen tribes. So what happens here is Dan is eliminated from that thirteen, and you end up with twelve at the end of the day. So it's an interesting—it's one of these numerology issues in the Bible that can be a little complicated, especially if you're mathematically challenged like me. But in the end, here you end up with a list of twelve tribes minus the tribe of Dan, and it's supposed to represent the plenitude of all the believing Israelites. So Levi is included here, and Joseph is included as well. So basically, in this list, Levi takes the place of Dan if you want to work the numbers out in your head.

In any case, that's the first part of John's vision. The second part of John's vision is a contrast, because whereas he could count the number of the remnant of Israel, when he shifts to the second part of the vision, he says:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could remember, from every nation...

In other words, this isn't just limited to Israel. It's the Gentiles. So he's seeing this second group, the innumerable multitude, is:

...from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...

And they have two other marks. So the first group was distinctive because of the mark on the forehead that sealed them as chosen. This group is holding palm branches in their hand and they're dressed in white robes. So what does that have to do with it?

Well, again, in the Old Testament, palm branches were associated with the feast of Tabernacles. So Tabernacles was a glorious feast celebrated in the fall—roughly around October when the fall harvest came in—and it was one of the three pilgrimage festivals of the law of Moses, where you go to the city of Jerusalem, offer sacrifice, and celebrate. And they would set up booths or tabernacles to live in around the city, and it was both a memorial of the exodus, but it was also kind of foretaste of the resurrection, of the new creation when people would recline, and they would relax and they would rejoice and sing psalms of joy. And in the fall harvest, the fruit comes in the harvest, so it was a feast of wine and rejoicing and celebration.

And so John here is taking the imagery of Tabernacles, and he's kind of using it to describe the glory of heaven, to describe the glory of the resurrection, to describe the glory of salvation. But he says something else that's interesting about these figures. He says they're dressed in white robes. Now in the Old Testament, who wore white robes? Well, it was the priests. So the priests would wear white linen vestments when they would go in to offer sacrifice in the temple. That was the standard garment of the priest. So these are a chosen group of priests from every nation.

Now you and I are going to at that point tend to ordained priests, as opposed to lay people. It's not what John means here, though, because if you read earlier in his

book of Revelation—chapter 5, for example—he’s describing all of the saints, all of the blessed. And he says:

...for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God... (Revelation 5:9b-10a)

So the kingdom of priests refers to the entire people of Israel. It isn’t just the ordained elders, but the entire people of Israel have a priestly function to offer praise and worship and sacrifice and glory to God. And so here he’s describing these Gentiles—fascinating enough—as if they were priests who were worshipping God, celebrating in the feast of Tabernacles. So John seems to be puzzled by this. You can see that when one of the elders in Heaven before the throne of God—because that’s where they are, by the way. They’re around the throne of God, so this is the heavenly kingdom. It’s the heavenly throne.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?”

And I love John’s response. He says:

“Sir, you know.”

In other words, you’re in Heaven. Why are you asking me? I’m having the vision. I don’t know. You tell me who they are...is effectively, I mean it’s respectful, but that’s basically what he’s saying. You tell me. And so the heavenly elder here explains the vision, which is frequently what will happen. If you have a seer on Earth have a vision of Heaven, the angel or some heavenly being is going to explain the meaning of it:

And he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

So...I wrote my dissertation on the Great Tribulation, so I could go on and on and on and on about this topic of the Great Tribulation. But I'll spare you...or at least I'll shorten it. In essence, the Great Tribulation was an ancient Jewish expectation you find in the prophets, that before the age of salvation would come, you would have an age of suffering. You would have a time of tribulation, and that the kingdom of God would not be ushered in without a preliminary period of tribulation and suffering.

And in my dissertation, I wrote about this—which is out of print, by the way, so no emails please about trying to get a copy of it. You can't get a copy of it. But I'll tell you about it. So in the Great Tribulation—as I wrote in the dissertation—effectively, Jesus in His passion and death, takes upon Himself the Great Tribulation. He takes the suffering upon Himself, and through His suffering, He brings in the resurrection. He brings in the kingdom. So what happens to Jesus personally in Himself will in a sense happen to the Church and the world at the end of time before the final resurrection of the dead. So salvation always comes through suffering, is the basic point.

And so here, what the elder is describing, is the chosen saints who have passed through suffering to salvation. But he uses this fascinating image of having washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Now if you've ever done laundry with a white garment, you'll know that if you get red on a white garment, it's not going to come out easily. So if you want to make a white garment clean, you don't wash it in blood. So there's a paradox here. They made their robes white by washing them in the blood of the lamb.

So the paradox here actually appears once again to reflect Jewish context, because the priests would go into the temple wearing white linen and then they sacrifice lambs. And what do you think that white linen would look like when they were done sacrificing? It'd be stained with the blood of the lamb. So John is using this image here basically to describe the Church, to describe Christians. And he seems to be emphasizing martyrs, but in effect, he's also talking about everyone. Because in essence, what happens to us when we are baptized? What happens to Christians when they're baptized? They're marked on the forehead with the sign of the cross,

but they also (since ancient times) they've worn a white garment to symbolize purification from sin through the water of Baptism and the blood of Christ.

So it's the blood of Christ that washes, cleanses the person from sin and makes them white, ironically, through the blood of the lamb. So in essence here, John is having a vision of the Church, taken from Israel and the Gentile and from all who have been washed and made clean through the blood of Christ—who have been made holy through the blood of Christ, who have been made a kingdom of priests through the water of Baptism and the blood of Jesus.

So the reason the Church chooses this passage for All Saints Day is because it is John's vision of the plenitude of the saved—the full number of the saved, both Israel and the Gentiles in the kingdom of Heaven. That's what he's describing. Now if you have any doubts about that, you can just look at the psalm for today. So that was a long intro to the first reading, but if you look at the psalm for today, it's Psalm 24. The refrain is:

Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.

And in this in verse 3, we get this famous line:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...

If you go down to verse 6, it says:

Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

So what's that about? Well, in its original context, that psalm is describing the desire of the people of Israel to ascend the hill of the Lord—that means to go up to mount Jerusalem, to the mountain of Zion—and to stand in His holy place. That means to enter into the temple.

Now who had the privilege of going into the holy place? Well, it was the priest and their white linen garments who could enter into God's presence. And in verse 6, when it says to:

...seek the face of the God of Jacob.

It's the desire to be in God's presence in the temple. Well, that description there dovetails perfectly with what we've seen in Revelation 7. Because what John is seeing in Revelation 7 is the Israelites and Gentiles who have been chosen to enter into the heavenly kingdom and who stand before the throne of God in the heavenly temple and see God face to face in the beatific vision. There, the longing of the heart of the psalmist to see the face of God and be in His presence, is fulfilled in the one hundred and forty-four thousand and the innumerable multitude in Heaven. So that's the bridge here between the first reading and the responsorial psalm...which then leads us into the Gospel for today, which is the famous text of the Beatitudes.

Now I have spoken about the Beatitudes in other videos, where we were working through the Gospel, but I'll just...for our purposes here, not read through them but I'm just going to focus on one Beatitude in particular. And it's the Beatitude:

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

So each of the Beatitudes for the poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for those who are meek, for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for those who are pure in heart, for those who are persecuted—these are all descriptions, as Jesus said, of those who are blessed or those who are happy in the new covenant. The Beatitudes are basically like a kind of profile of the saints. If you want to enter into the kingdom of Heaven, then be poor in spirit. You want to see the face of God? Then be pure of heart. You want to be called a son of God? Then be a peacemaker. You want to receive mercy from God? Then be merciful.

So it's a profile of sanctity, the secret of happiness, of joy in this life, that Jesus gives at the very beginning of the sermon on the mount. And in the history of the Church, the Beatitudes have always been regarded as a description of the saints...of

what the saints look like. You want to see a saint? Look at the virtues being described to us in the Beatitudes.

And so the Church gives us the Beatitudes as the Gospel for today, because it not only wants it to tell us about John's vision of the saints in the book of Revelation, but it also wants to give us what we should aspire to—the profile of sanctity in the new covenant and in this world today.

And you don't have to take my word for it. You can actually just look at the *Catechism*. I'll end with this quote from the *Catechism* about the Beatitudes. Listen to what it says in paragraph 1717. The *Catechism* says this about the Gospel for today:

*The Beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity. They express the vocation of the faithful associated with the glory of his Passion and Resurrection; they shed light on the actions and attitudes characteristic of the Christian life; they are the paradoxical promises that sustain hope in the midst of tribulations; they proclaim the blessings and rewards already secured, however dimly, for Christ's disciples; they have begun in the lives of the Virgin Mary and all the saints.*²

Catechism 1717. So beautifully there, the *Catechism* wraps up why do we read from the Beatitudes on the feast of All Saints...is because these are the actions and the attitudes that are characteristic not just of Christ Himself, but they're the profile of sanctity that the virtues that we see manifested in life, not just of Mary but of all the saints.

So on this feast of All Saints, we remember our own vocation, that each one of us is called to live the life of the Beatitudes so that we might be numbered among that innumerable multitude of the elect that John sees in Revelation 7, who...

...have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1717