

Saints Alive!

Preached FCCW November 5, 2017 All Saints Day

Revelation 7:9-17

In Coventry, England there stands a very uniquely modern cathedral.

The massive south wall of that structure is made entirely of glass.

And etched into the glass are the huge figures -- four feet wide and ten feet tall -- of saints and angels.

They're having a party -- blowing trumpets and making merry and dancing across that massive wall of glass.

I don't know what inspired the design of the cathedral, but the images etched into that glass wall could be a recreation of the scene in heaven that is described in the passage we read from Revelation.

There we find this surreal panorama where angels and strange creatures are continually worshipping God.

In their midst stands a vast and diverse multitude of people in white robes representing purity waving palm branches representing victory, praising God and the Lamb, who is Jesus.

An elder asks "Who are these people, and where have they come from?"

To which, John, the person who was having this vision, answers, "I don't know. You tell me."

The Book of Revelation is filled with strange visions and symbols that throughout history have seemed to raise more questions than they have answered.

But as to the question of the identity of the white robed multitude, there has been little disagreement. They have always been recognized as the saints of the faith.

But that answer in itself begs another question: what, exactly is a saint?

In the Roman Catholic tradition that I grew up in, saints lived in stained glass windows, statues, and medallions.

They had their own special days reserved for them on the calendar.

Some had their own turf, like St. Patrick with Ireland.

Others had special ministries, such as St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes and hospitals. They were venerated, prayed to, larger than life characters.

There is another category of saints, though.

Because we are too familiar with the human frailties and flaws of these saints, we tend to lose sight of their sainthood.

Yet they are quite probably the ones through whom we have most directly been touched by the hand of God.

They may be parents or friends; Sunday school teachers or college professors.

As the beloved hymn says, one could be a doctor and another a queen; one might be a soldier and another a priest.

You might meet them in school, or in lanes or at sea; in trains or planes, in shops or at tea.

Those are the saints that we particularly memorialize today, on All Saints Day.

So, think about this.

If you were standing before that scene in Revelation, facing the multitude, whose faces would you see there?

Who are your saints?

Pause to consider the ways in which their legacy has contributed to the person you are today; to shaping the world that you know today, to making this church's witness what it has been.

This morning, we will read their names and honor their memories, at least those who have died since the last All Saints Day.

Then there will be a moment of silence to honor the saints that have left their mark on your lives, be it large or small; be they near or far.

But, before we get to that, there's more to the story of that cathedral in Coventry that I haven't told you.

In November of 1940, Coventry and its inhabitants suffered the longest air raid endured in any one night by any city in England during World War II.

It was an air raid which killed and destroyed and reduced the whole city to ruins.

Including its cathedral.

When they built the new cathedral, it was purposefully constructed so that to look through that modern glass wall, beyond all the saints dancing in heaven etched upon it, is then to see the painful ruins of the old bombed-out church.

And to look upon the ruins, you could not escape the awareness that beyond death and mortality there is another reality.

A life where hunger and thirst are but memories. Where every tear is wiped away and replaced by springs of living water.

Friends, sainthood occurs not only in heaven, but wherever that triumphant vision from Revelation is superimposed over the brokenness of human existence, just like that glass wall superimposes its joyous celebrations over the ruins of that Coventry Cathedral.

The examples of saints past and present remind us that there is a reality beyond meaninglessness and suffering, both here, and hereafter.

Sainthood is not something earned; something reserved for haloed, perfect people. It rises out of the rubble of our humanity but it transforms the ruins of life by grasping God's promise to gather up our flawed being and redeem us for God's purposes.

The throng of saints in the scene from Revelation is not praised for their accomplishments.

All that is said is that they have survived the ordeals of life, with whatever mistakes, sins, and scars that they accumulated along the journey, washed away by the all sacrificing love of the Lamb, who is Jesus.

You and I are also to be numbered among the multitude pictured in Revelations.

We are God's saints alive!

We are bound to the saints past, whose work and witness have made our work and witness possible.

And we are bound to one another as living saints, responsible for the witness that we present for those around us, and those who will follow us.

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