

## All Saints' Day (1<sup>st</sup> November 2020): Revelation 7:9-17

The Covid restrictions are gradually tightened, but the 'R' number remains stubbornly above 1. Hospitalisations rise; more businesses start to crack and crumble. The warmth and brightness of the summer – when some of these things didn't seem to weigh quite so heavily – fades into a distant memory, as the nights draw rapidly in.

And even once we've worked our way down through all the Coronavirus headlines to the second layer of news, we just seem to come across yet more of the usual old kinds of disheartening stuff – terrorist plotting, never-ending war in Syria, corrupt Governments, lands devastated by drought, floods or storms.

Hopefully, most of us will not feel quite as 'down' as that about the state of the world, at least most of the time. But the unmistakable reality is that, alongside its many joys and blessings, this life is always likely to carry its doses (whether large or small) of suffering, affliction, and perhaps even persecution – doses of what is described in verse 14 of our Revelation reading today as 'the great tribulation' or 'ordeal' (depending on which translation we're using).

However, this chapter of Revelation (chapter 7), which comes as a welcome interlude in the middle of an account of a series of sobering judgments in chapters 6 and 8, does also give us a wonderfully encouraging picture of how things *will* one day be, or as the great Puritan commentator Matthew Henry described it 300 years ago: "it secures the graces and comforts of the people of God in times of calamity".

It paints a portrait of a Church which is, first, protected by God, and then delivered victorious by God, into a glorious future of praise and worship in his presence. So let's now examine this portrait more closely, and enjoy its shapes and colours, beginning with that protection which God provides for his people.

In our reading God is *ultimately* described as spreading a tent, or shelter, over us, in a picture of complete protection. In the meantime, though, his protection is *not* a full insulation for us against all forms of hardship or trials, but (rather) an assurance that he will keep us intact and bring us through them.

So the first 8 verses of the chapter (that's the bit before our reading) talk of how he puts a *seal* on our heads – a seal of *ownership* (we are his), a seal of *authentication* (we really are his!), and a seal of *security* (we will remain his). For as the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (8:39): "*nothing* will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

What God has begun, we can be confident he will complete. And so the big picture – the centrepiece – of our passage is one of triumphant celebration, as a great multitude of people that no-one can count, drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language, stand before the throne of God – wearing white robes of victory and waving their palm branches (in another traditional symbol of victory).



Who are all these people, this great multitude? Well, they may be an enormously high number, way beyond what we mere mortals can count (like hairs on a head or grains of sand on the seashore) – but God knows them all by name, and they make up a ‘complete set’. The first part of the chapter gives the figure 144,000, although that’s just a symbolic number a long way below the actual total – it’s chosen to illustrate perfection and completion, being 12 x 12 x 1000 if you like your arithmetic (with there being 12 Old Testament tribes of Israel and 12 New Testament apostles, and 1,000 being a nice big round number).

And then, the rest of the question which the (so-called) elder rather curiously asks John (the writer of the book of Revelation), but John sensibly bats back at him: “where have these people come from?” How do they all come to be here?

The answer: “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”. Now, that doesn’t sound like the normal way of getting a dazzling ‘Persil’ whiteness into your clothes (does it?) – giving them a jolly good soaking in sheep’s blood.

But of course this is (once again) not a *literal* comment. It is though a vivid illustration of how the dirtiness of the sin that affects each and every one of us, that uncleanness which disqualifies us from being in the presence of a holy God, can only be made good through Jesus’ death for us on the cross – in his once-and-for-ever perfect sacrifice which achieved what all those old and repeated animal sacrifices never could.

So this ‘great multitude’ is made up of all those of us who have put our trust in Jesus as the one who has saved us from our sins – the one who has once again turned us into ‘holy ones’ (i.e., ‘saints’, from the Latin), in God’s eyes. It is the ‘great multitude’ of all the ‘saints’ from all over the world and all ages of history.

And what is it that we then have to look forward to as these ‘saints’? Our portrait of heaven in Revelation chapter 7 does give us something of a foretaste, although I think we need to acknowledge that our understanding is going to be pretty sketchy until we actually get there.

Unsurprisingly, there seems to be plenty of praise and worship going on. But there are a couple of points that strike me about where John’s description of this begins. First (interestingly), it’s the ‘great multitude’ who get to shout their praises first – *followed* by the heavenly angels. So, there’s no ‘lockdown constraints’ here, where the rest of us have to get a choir (or a YouTube recording) to vocalise our praises for us...

And then (also) the very first word loudly proclaimed in this chorus of praise is ‘salvation’: “salvation belongs to our God.. and to the Lamb”. There are no doubt quite a few people who think the church bangs on a bit too much about this idea of ‘salvation’ (and the ‘sin’ which means that salvation is needed), but it is so central to the Christian faith. And as we’ve already noted, it’s the only reason – the only basis – by which we’re able to be there, to be with God.

That *being* with God, that being in the *presence* of God, becomes the focal point of John’s picture – with Jesus, the Lamb of God, at the very centre of the throne, surrounded by this multitude of saints, completely fulfilled. No more tears or pain, no lingering hunger or thirst – only a thirst for God which is now amply satisfied.



So what a wonderful, uplifting portrait of our future! But how about the here and now? To what extent can we be serving the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and be soaking in his grace, in the manner we might anticipate when we get to heaven?

Well, in essence that's where the 'Beatitudes' – the 'beautiful attitudes' or character traits that Jesus spells out in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 5:1-12) – take us to:

- a 'poverty of spirit' which keeps us free of pride and any sense of self-sufficiency;
- a passionate desire for peace and to see goodness prevail;
- empathy, mercy, meekness and purity of heart;
- and even a willingness to suffer persecution.

Jesus declares it again and again: *this* is the way to be 'blessed' – meaning, to be truly 'happy by God'.

It isn't the kind of basis on which a politician would be likely to fight an election. But it is Jesus' prescription for a happy, joyful life – as we join with him in building his kingdom here on earth, and as we wait to join him one day in heaven.