

... a great multitude that no one could count

Revelation 7:9–17

Psalm 34:1–10, 22

1 John 3:1–3

Matthew 5:1–12

Text: Revelation 7:9

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.

Introduction

In the church calendar, November 1st is marked as All Saints' Day, also known as All Hallows' Day, Halloween, or the Feast of All Saints, a Christian festival celebrated in honour of all the saints, known and unknown. As an aside, October 31 is named Halloween because it is the eve of All Hallows' Day. Tomorrow, November 2nd, is All Souls' Day—for those who follow the church calendar—also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed.

1. The idea of a church calendar may tweak the curiosity of some. The naming of days for certain causes is not so strange—April 22 has been named as Earth Day, for example. The United Nations observes designated days, weeks, years, and decades, each with a theme, or topic; in their calendar November 2, for example, is the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. So, why does the church name certain days? Isn't the Gregorian calendar sufficient—today is November 1st. Most of us are unaware that for large parts of our world the Gregorian calendar has been in use for only 438 years. In the Chinese calendar 2020 (Year of the Rat), November 1st is an auspicious day for breaking ground for a building. So, what does all this marking of days indicate?

The church calendar in its marking of days and seasons is part of the church's confession that we live by a narrative of life that is revealed in God's incursion into the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We believe that we inhabit a world in which the redemptive purposes of God are unfolding. The story we live by, while it includes the history of nations and peoples, is a story of how God is calling a people to himself. The calendar is part of our witness to Jesus Christ. Some people in our world believe, for example, that we live in a closed universe; an immanent order left to our own devices to manage life. For the Christian, we confess that we live in the world God created and is graciously redeeming out of his great love for humanity in the wake of the fall. Christians bear witness that the reality of human existence is a reality that unfolds in relationship to God.

When I was a young boy stores were closed on Sundays. The legal structures of our society that regulated commercial enterprise then reflected this Christian narrative with Sunday marked in that way. As society has changed and another narrative about the reality of human existence now dominates, it seems to me that it is increasingly important for Christians to be deliberate about living our life according to the reality that is Jesus Christ. Following a church calendar

that is organized around the itinerary of our Lord's life, death, and resurrection can help us in this regard.

All Saints' Day draws attention to a particular point in the story that is this reality of our life in Jesus Christ. The point we focus on is captured in the heavenly vision of the Revelation of John where he saw before the throne of God "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." The first stanza of the hymn, 'For All The Saints' points to this scene; For all the saints, who from their labours rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed, thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest."

2. If I were to ask people in our congregation today, 'how did you come to faith in Jesus Christ,' or 'tell me your faith story;' invariably it would be a story about people. Each of us found our way to faith through the witness of others. Or, as the hymn writer put it of these saints who have gone before us—"who thee by faith before the world confessed, thy name, O Jesus." We found our way to faith through the witness of others who confessed faith in Jesus.

Now some of these people who pushed or pulled us towards faith we have not met face to face. We meet them through their writings—names like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But there are others who inspire us. I find myself inspired by the commitment of the theologian and pastor Karl Barth. In his opposition to Naziism in Germany in the 1930's, Barth was the principle author of the Barmen Declaration for the Confessing Church. It declares that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Barth was removed from his teaching position at gunpoint for his resistance to the Nazi regime. In a world where other narratives are every trying to push Christians into their mould, I am inspired by the clarity of this vision that Jesus Christ is that one word we hear, trust, and obey.

And many of you have your 'saints' from the past who inspire you. Maybe there is someone you have intended to read about but haven't managed to yet, may I encourage you to take up connection with the writings of those who have bore witness to Jesus in times before us. There is much help to be found there; Christians before us have faced challenges similar to those that beset us, including pandemics. Keep in mind that all these witnesses to our Lord had 'clay feet', just as we do. They are not perfect nor claimed to be. Still, our Lord blesses their witness to ignite faith in others.

And an amazing feature of this reality that is Jesus Christ is, that as we bear witness to Jesus in our world, we become those through whom others find their way to faith. It is very often the case that our witness bears fruit of which we are often unaware. Think about the livestream of our services. People can join us who we do not know. I understand that it is the preacher's voice they hear or the leader's voice as scripture is read or the singer's voice(s) as prayers are offered in song. Even so, each of us has a role to play in this witness as we gather together to worship—this happens because we are committed as a church to worship together corporately. And we all have a role to play in that worship.

John Bunyan, the best-known Puritan author (*Pilgrim's Progress*), came to faith in Jesus Christ when he accidentally overheard four impoverished women talking naturally among themselves

about what it meant to them to be bathed in God's love for them, what it meant to know Jesus. "They sounded to me as though they had found a new world", Bunyan wrote later.

These witnesses are instrumental for helping us find faith and are used by our Lord to sustain us in faith. When blindsided by some reversal or loss in life the believer finds that the faith of others holds her through such times. Many have known those moments when it was hard to pray and we needed others to pray when we could not. When I meet with a family facing a tragedy I know I need to do a lot of listening; as we pour out our hearts in conversation our Lord hears the anguish of our hearts and in many respects, this too is prayer. And when we meet together for corporate worship, we are blessed that there are others who join with us in the witness to Jesus Christ. We are sustained in faith by the witness of others.

Whether the witness is a contemporary in the pew with us or in that great company who have gone before us, the gospel asserts that we are all one church. The reality of our existence in Jesus Christ is not determined by the barrier we call death; to be out of sight is not to be out of mind, in the providence of our Lord. When the Apostle John saw that vision of "a great multitude that no one could count" before the throne of God; the revelation was given to encourage the church on earth facing difficult days of persecution.

Listen again to how the hymn writer put it. "O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine." The author of the letter Hebrews touches on the same reality with a different metaphor. The metaphor is a stadium as runners are running a race and the writer speaks of us as 'surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses'; those in the stands cheering us on are those who have gone before us. And the hymn writer goes on to paint an image of being encouraged by those who have gone before us; "And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph-song, and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong."

3. The scripture readings of All Saints' Day focuses our attention to the final chapter of this great reality that is Jesus Christ. And how it all ends has everything to do with what "it" is now. In many respects, it is the same for any narrative about our existence. For those who see the world as a closed system with no overarching purpose, one is left with trying to make do the best we can with the need we sense to be purposeful—to make our life matter. What we see as the end or purpose or lack of purpose, has everything to do with how we live now. In probing the Christian narrative on this point, I trust it has been such that invites any who do not share our faith to consider the vision of life that animates Christians.

In theology this discussion of how it all culminates—the end—we call eschatology. And various churches approach the subject of the "end" from different angles of vision. Roman Catholic eschatology traditionally emphasizes sight: we are going to see God in a beatific vision that renders all fuzziness precisely focussed. As we read from the letter of 1 John today, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." In Roman Catholic liturgy the gospel is primarily seen rather than heard. The Roman Catholic Church has never lacked those whose visions of Jesus have quickened them to risk everything in a grand venture with him. This is partly why their churches are filled with art.

Reformed eschatology (our heritage) emphasizes knowledge: while we know but in part throughout our earthly sojourn, we shall know God in a way that dispels all doubt and remedies all ignorance. In Reformed liturgy the gospel is primarily heard. The Reformed tradition's emphasis on the revealed knowledge of God, on faith born of hearing the Word, will come to a climax in an apprehension of God that fully satisfies humankind's hunger to know even as the knowledge never satiates. This is why preaching is an emphasized part of Reformed worship services.

As many of you know, I am fond of John Wesley. While upholding the truth of both seeing God and knowing God, Wesley insisted that our vision of God and our knowledge of God would be gathered up and crowned in our love for God as finally we were "lost in wonder, love and praise." We hear both these themes in the Apostle Paul; "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Wesley relished both yet cherished the letter of 1st John above all just because it tolled relentlessly the love wherewith God loves us and the love whereby we must love one another.

"Beloved, let us love one another," writes John "because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. "

Wesley's eschatology of love—his emphasis that that final place, the end, will be one filled with love, as love gives way to only more love—had everything to do with his understanding of the Christian life. Christian existence, he insisted, is a life of self-forgetful love for God and neighbour. The future you see has everything to do with what you give yourself to now.

4. The hymn "For all the Saints" is a fitting hymn for "All Saints' Day." There is a progression in this hymn that begins with praise to God for those who witnessed to the name of Jesus in our world, moves to praise Jesus for sustaining them in that witness, reflects on our witness now and our looking forward to joining the chorus of cheerleaders, and then culminates in two stanzas of that final glory. I love these last two stanzas.

But lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day—the saints triumphant rise in bright array: the King of glory passes on his way.

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

"I looked," said the Apostle John, "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." Amen.