

## Who are these?

### Year B, Sunday After All Saints – Revelation 21:1-6a

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson November 4, 2012*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I had an interesting talk with a couple of my, shall we say, more “evangelical” friends this past week. That is to say that they have a more conservative, literalistic approach to the interpretation of Scriptures than I usually adopt.

Our conversation, not to say argument, hinged on differing interpretations of what will take place at the end of times, when, as the Creeds say, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” On this subject, my friends come from a point of view with which I am familiar since it is the one with which I was raised, a point of view that takes apart biblical prophecy, especially the book of the Revelation, and tries to find in the symbolism there some clue to our present time – kind of a, Saint John meets Nostradamus way of looking at the Book of Revelation. As a teenager, I was very accomplished at reciting the standard 19th century holiness movement interpretations of the seven seals, and the seven bowls, and the seven woes, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. I suspect I could probably hold up my end of such a conversation to this day, if required. In the last many years, however, I have come to adopt the same attitude toward the the Book of the Revelation to John as was held by such notable Protestants as Martin Luther and John Calvin. That is, since the Revelation is subject to such wide interpretive differences, I generally leave it alone altogether.

There are, however, a few passages in the Book of Revelation that I really *like*, glimpses by John, “the disciple that Jesus loved,” of what heaven itself is like. This morning’s reading from that book is one of the most precious such visions, a passage that is among the choices to be used for the Burial Office, but is thankfully also in the Lectionary for All Saints’ Day. The image of the a new holy city filled with those whose robes have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb of God, where death itself has been negated, and where every tear has been wiped away, that image is an image that always thrills me, and always excites me, and often provokes me.

But as I looked at it again this week in the context of our celebration of the Feast of All Saint, I was reminded of the question that was posed to the Apostle when he *first* beheld the uncountable throng gathered around the Throne of God, “who *are* these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?”

“Who are these?” Who are these saints that we celebrate today? In their time, some were humanitarians, giving of themselves and their resources to live out the great commandments to love God and each other. In their time, some were scholars and theologians, great orators and prophets and preachers, adding to our depth of understanding of God. In their time, some were kings and queens, bishops and priests, monks and missionaries, upholding and defending and spreading the Church of Christ. In their time, some were mothers and fathers, passing on bedtime prayers and table graces, teachers and farmers and workers with their hands, living out their deep, quiet faith day, by day, by day.

“Who are these, clothed in white robes?” In their time, some of their robes were trimmed in ermine and some were shabby and threadbare. In their time, some of their robes were ripped and torn by wild beasts, run through by swords or riddled by bullets. In their time, some were stained with the bloody sand of the Coliseum or burned by the fires of the stake at Oxford or covered with the choking dust of Calcutta. In their time, some were drenched in tears shed praying for the son or daughter who had lost their way, for the wife or husband who had closed their heart, for the hungry stranger who had not yet heard the glorious name of Jesus.

“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?” In their time, some traveled far and wide to spread the good news of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. In their time, some

founded churches or colleges or even *cities*. In their time, some died in the streets of Rome or Sarajevo, Berlin or Campala or Selma. In their time, some lived and worked and worshipped in the avenues, in the back alleys, in the gutters of Paris or Peking, of Assisi or Algiers, of Hong Kong – or Henderson.

“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?” In their time, they have stood in every station of human life and culture, they have been clothed richly and in rags, and they have come from every corner of the globe. But one day, in *God’s* time, when time itself is no more, when we finally see the saints in glory, we will find that they have no station at all but to serve in heaven the one whom they had served on earth. They wear *new* robes, of *dazzling* white, washed fresh and spotless and pure by the precious blood of their Savior and Lord. Their journeys finally done, they rest forever in the presence of their God and King.

This morning, rather than the Nicene Creed we repeat nearly every time we gather, we will use a statement of faith that is even older. The service leaflet notwithstanding, we will reaffirm our faith using the Baptismal Covenant, a question/answer version of the Apostle’s Creed which includes that little phrase, “We believe in the communion of saints.”

As it is every time we gather in the Lord’s name, every time we break the bread of his body, every time we baptize a new member into his holy kingdom, our celebration this morning is not so much a celebration *of* the saints as it is a celebration *with* the saints. The Church’s liturgy on earth is at once both a participation *in*, and an anticipation *of* the triumph song of heaven itself. Just as we Christians comfort, strengthen, and encourage each other in our daily lives, so the faithful departed join with us in our prayers, join with us in our praises, and join with us especially in our struggles. We are forever and intimately linked with all those, in every time and in every place, who have gone before us proclaiming the risen Christ.

*We* can pray with confidence, even with *boldness*, because in *their* time, the prayers of the saints prayers have been heard and have been answered. We can share Christ’s love with the world because in their time, so many others have shared that love with us. We can sing because in their time, by their faithful living, through their struggles, in their victories, the saints now gathered before the Throne of God have taught us their own song of triumph, the song of the great cloud of witnesses to Christ’s love and mercy and power. You know the song, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty!” Because we have learned it from all those who have marched in faith before us, we can trust that the One who is called “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,” is also that One that has indeed, and for always, made *all* things new.”