

Revelation 7:9-17

Dear fellow saints in Christ, why is it that we speak of those who have died in the past tense? "He was a hard worker in the church." "She had a strong faith." "He did this, she was that, they were, but they are no more." We speak as though the dead in Christ were only people of the past and not of the present. As if they fell off the train somewhere back there and the train has sped along the tracks without them. Our loved ones were with us, but now they are only in our memories.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Our text for All Saints Day in Revelation 7 does not speak of the dead in Christ using only language of the past tense. It speaks of them as being in the present, the eternal present. "After this I looked," writes John, "And behold a great multitude...standing before the throne...clothed in white robes carrying palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice...these are before the throne of God...they serve Him in His temple day and night."

These verbs are not past, but present tense verbs. They speak of God's saints not as memories of what they were, but as who they are now. And even though this scene in heaven is a scene from the future, the language of heaven is always of the eternal present, for when God's saints enter into Paradise they do not set their clocks back or move them forward; they do not take their clocks with them. They leave the "rat-race," the time schedules of earth behind and enter that place where time is swallowed up by eternity.

Our loved ones in Christ did not fall off the train. When they died Jesus carried them ahead of us to the train station. They are already at the final destination and are waiting for us to arrive. But even as they wait, they are with us in time because they are with Christ just as we are with Christ, and Jesus unites time and eternity together into one.

For us today who are living in time, we are allowed the opportunity to see God's saints in heaven from three vantage points. Our text speaks of them having a past. It shows them in the present. And it speaks of their future. And however we view these saints--past, present, or future--we always see them in connection with Jesus for He is, as the Bible declares, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

"Who are these," one of the Elders asked John in his vision, "And from where have they come?" Everyone in heaven has a past. You do not go to heaven without one. No Israelite entered the Promised Land of Canaan without first traveling through the desert. And no one enters the Promised Land of Heaven without having lived here on the earth. But the fact of the matter is that we make too much of our past. Either we count on our past getting us into heaven, or we despair that our past will keep us out of heaven. We recall what we have done in our past life, whether good or bad, and such recollections give us either false hopes or terrible nightmares.

Revelation 7 does speak of God's saints as having a past, but the only thing it says about these coming out of all the trials and tribulations here on earth is that "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." It does not say, "They tried their best to keep the Commandments." It does not say, "They were good people," or "They were good enough to be called saints of God." "They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb"--that's all it says about their past...period!

No saint is in heaven because of their past, and no saint is barred from heaven because of their past. God's saints in heaven were some of the worst sinners on earth. The thief on the cross, the murderer Saul who became the Apostle Paul, denying Peter, the hated little thief Zaccheus. No saint

in heaven is a saint in the eyes of the world. Everyone there, our loved ones included, has a past which is full of every sinful and wicked thing we could imagine. They are not there because of their past; they are there because in their past they washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. They lived and died in Christ. They did not trust in their good works to save them; they trusted in Christ Jesus. They did not despair that their sins would ban them from heaven; they believed that in Christ they were forgiven. Baptized into Christ, hearing and trusting His words, nourished by His body and blood, these saints are today dressed in white. The innocence of Christ covers them no matter what is in their past.

Friend, you have a past, as do I. Lay it to rest in Christ. You are not God's saints because of what you did in your past. You are saints because Christ has washed you at His font, because He draws you to His Holy Meal, because He puts His holy and living words into your ears. I know that you have many dreadful sins in your past because I also do. Do not live in your past; live in Christ. You are forgiven. Jesus' blood cleanses you of every sin in your past.

In John's vision God's saints in heaven live in the present. What do they do in the present? They are before the throne of God, they cry out for joy with loud voices, they are at peace, they serve God. It does not say of these saints, "They worry about the economy;" "They wonder if the health-care reform bill will pass;" "They are frustrated by the weather;" "They are concerned about their loved ones." All these things and more, are in our present, but they are not in the present of those in heaven. For them there are no worries. There is no boredom. They have no health concerns. They are never lonely. Their days and nights are filled with joy. They have no sins to struggle with. They have nothing anymore ever to fear.

Like a little child who walks through the gates of Disneyworld for the first time, so much wonder, so much joy--the child doesn't care what happened yesterday--he is in Disneyworld today. He does not think at all about having to leave in a few days--he is living joyfully in the present. And such are the saints in heaven. They live only in the joy-filled present, and they never have to leave. The joy is theirs forever and it will never grow old.

Whatever is in your present; whatever worries, troubles, and frustrations--Jesus is not just the Savior of your past, He is here for you in your present as well. His words give strength to you today. His Sacred Meal sustains you now in this life. His forgiveness is for your past and for your present. Do you miss your loved ones? Do you see them only in pictures and memories? Trust in God's Word. They are with you right now. In Christ we are together--God's saints in heaven and on earth. When water from a kettle evaporates, it does not leave the room. The water is still there in the air, you just are unable to see it. Your loved ones who died in Christ did not leave you. They are still with you. You and I just cannot see them or touch them. But Jesus joins them with us. Coming to His Holy Sacrament, the seen and the unseen are united in His flesh and blood. In Holy Communion there is no past or future--there is only the eternal present. You may have set your clocks back last night, but when you partake of Christ's body and blood, you leave your clocks behind. You who live in time are one with those who live in eternity, for Jesus brings us all together in His body given for you.

Having our present filled with Christ we can look with joy to the future. In heaven John is told that nothing but joy awaits God's saints. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore, they will not sweat in any hot sun or heat, and every tear from their eyes will be forever wiped away." This is no fairy tale, but we could in truth end with the words, "And they lived happily ever after." That will not happen here on earth. Our struggles will continue here. Our economy here is anybody's guess. Our health will get worse here over time. Do not fear. This is your day. All Saints Day is for the living

and for the dead. One day you will join the saints in heaven. One day you will be a part of that great multitude. One day you will live happily ever after.

But not yet. Tomorrow we arrive at Disneyworld, but today we are still on the way. Tomorrow we join the Church Triumphant, but today we are still in the fight. We fight against sin and temptation. We fight against the powers of hell. Not by might of ours, but with Christ by our side; with His words in our ears, His baptism covering us, His salvation given to us. Do not grow weary today; we are in this thing together. We need to encourage one another. The Promised Land is coming, but we are still in the desert. Let us keep following our Lord. Let us keep drinking His words of life.

Keep the faith. One day it will all be worth it. In heaven your future holds for you nothing but joy. In heaven you will have no regrets. You can rest in heaven; now there is work to be done. In heaven you can look at your past and say, "It is Christ alone who brought me here." In heaven every day will be filled with joy. And in heaven your joy will never come to an end. Past, present, and future--as God's saints in Christ, this is what awaits you in heaven. Amen.