

All Saints' Week – Year A – November 5, 2008 Homily
Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
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Years ago, I read a book, the name of which I can no longer remember, that asked the questions of what is heaven like, and what do we do in heaven. At that time, I was rather surprised by the author's response. According to his interpretation of Scripture and his view of heaven, the purpose of our lives here on earth and in heaven is to worship God. So far so good, worshipping God *is* the primary purpose in life for every human being. However, the author considered worship in heaven to be similar to that described in our passage from Revelation, where saints and angels surround God's throne day and night in worship. As I look back now, I think he had a rather limited view of what constitutes worship of God, and God's heavenly kingdom. As Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, "the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Appropriately, in this life and in everlasting life, worship will be the specific act of bowing down before God's altar or throne with great joy to offer ourselves in thanksgiving and service to God. Yet in the Beatitudes and many of Matthew's parables, we have a fuller picture of the kingdom of heaven. One that is much richer and more diverse in the ways and means that we are called to worship God. In essence, our worship of God is a constant in all that we are and all that we do. Worshipping God is a way of life, not just an occasional act of obeisance.

Worship is a central part of John's vision, and central to the great narrative of our Judeo-Christian tradition. It is the Egyptian leaders' refusal to allow the Israelites to worship God that begins the great exodus to freedom and the Promised Land. The Ten Commandments bring worship of God and only God under the Law for all the faithful. One of Satan's temptations for Jesus is to gain the world by bowing down and worshipping him instead of God. Even at the end of John's Revelation, we have the command to "Worship only God!" (Revelation 22:9). A life of faith requires us to worship God. It is about living our lives out of trust and hope in order to create an oasis in the midst of the chaos of life in the world.

The context for this evening's passage from Revelation is also important for us. As we have seen, worshipping God is a constant in our history and tradition. Worship opens us to God's presence, and through worship we are strengthened and blessed with courage. Corporate worship unites all members of the Body of Christ, past and present as a witness of God's goodness, love and grace in a world that seems to be falling apart at the seams. Everywhere we look, there is violence and injustice. But that is not God's way, and in Christ's life, death and resurrection we celebrate His victory over sin and death, over all the violence of the world. In Baptism, we are marked as Christ's own, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and separated out from the evil of the world. Sin cannot take away the promise of eternal life, nor the peace that only God can give us. The consequences of humanity's wickedness cannot steal away or separate us from the love of God. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" and that promise is never lost to us. The gift of God's grace through our faith protects us from being overwhelmed by the evils of a sin-sick world. Nevertheless, we will all experience the suffering that is the consequence of sin and iniquity, in solidarity with Jesus, our Lord. As Eugene Peterson says, "all evil takes place in an historical arena bounded by Christ and prayer. Evil is not explained but surrounded." And we might add, overcome and defeated by Christ.

In our own lives, when we start to feel overwhelmed by the consequences of sin in the world – our own sins and the sins of others -- it is good to remember the Biblical and historical context that is elucidated for us in John's Revelation. We are a part of that continuing grand narrative of Scripture. Our role is to be the presence of the Body of Christ in and to the world. You and I are

also a part of the continuing historical context. Again, we are a part of the world, even as we have been set apart from it. We are here to illumine the Light of Christ, and bear witness to this generation that God's Light is not, and never will be, overcome by darkness or despair.

Let me also propose that worship is a key part of our stewardship of God's gifts to you and to me. As Christians -- as lovers and followers of Jesus Christ our Savior -- our gift to the world is the remembrance in our personal and corporate worship that Christ has won the victory and that the Risen Lord is always with us. In Christ, there is freedom, peace and there is everlasting life. In worship, Christians gather to celebrate the salvation of the whole world, and to be fed with spiritual food that brightens the Light of Christ in our own hearts, and for the benefit of all around us -- enemies, friends, and neighbors. In *Leaves From a Spiritual Notebook*, Dwight Bradley wrote this about worship. "For worship is a thirsty land crying out for rain, / It is a candle in the act of being kindled, / It is a drop in quest of the ocean,... / It is a voice in the night calling for help, / It is a soul standing in awe before the mystery of the universe,... / It is time flowing into eternity,... [one] climbing the altar stairs to God." This poem eloquently describes Christianity as a way of life, and stewardship as a way of life. That is our being and doing in this world, which makes such a difference.

Worship is one of the most important ways we live God's gift of stewardship. Worship is one of the most important ways that we share our faith with one another and with the whole community. It is no less worship when we are serving our neighbors with a loving and joyful heart, than it is worship when we gather together in this place to offer ourselves in body, mind and spirit to God. It is a form of worship when we reach out to others because of the deep gratitude in our own hearts for all that God has done for us. We worship God when we honor and glorify Him by seeking and serving Christ in all persons. We worship our gracious Lord when we strive for God's justice and peace in the world, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick or imprisoned. You and I worship God when we share our story of faith with another, because stewardship is about growing God's kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven. Let us all follow the Lamb to the springs of the water of life, and show others the way.

Amen.