

Today is All Saints Sunday, when we remember those who have gone before us in the faith, reading aloud the names of those who have died in the last year. There is sadness in remembering those lost to our sight. But there is also gladness that they were a part of the fabric of our lives for some period of time; and joy that they are now gathered with all those brought fully into God's resurrection life. So on this day we touch pain and comfort and hope.

And all these parts of the faith are gathered into the the first lesson heard this morning. Last week someone asked me what the readings were for this Sunday. When I said I was preaching from The Revelation of John, they made a face and looked as though they were suddenly thinking of plans to be out of town. I find that to be a pretty typical reaction to this scripture that we often think of as being found in the whack-job section of the Bible (along with Daniel)

But it's important to know that The Revelation was not written as a bizarre, blood-soaked prediction of the future. Rather, it is a book of symbolic code, designed to elude the gaze of Roman authority. It was written to comment on the difficulties of life for Christians under the empire called Pax Romana, in the late first century CE. Its purpose was to bring support to the faithful suffering persecution and peril at that time. It was, in other words, an underground literature of hope.

Its fundamental message is that even when it looks as though Rome holds all the cards, the Empire is already defeated. In the end God wins; evil loses. And those included in that great victory are not a select group of extra Holy Christians, but a mob too big to count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. This vision of saints gathered before the throne is a vision of resurrection life overflowing with people of infinite difference and depth. They are all there. We are all there.

John's Revelation is also talking about those gathered before the throne as those who have come through the great ordeal. In the KJ and the older RS translations, the more evocative word 'tribulation' was used. The gathered saints had come through 'the great tribulation'. This is a word from the Latin *tribulum*, that means literally "grinding". It refers to the heavy threshing sledge dragged over grain to separate the stems and husks. Revelation uses this language for all those whose lives had been painfully broken under the dragging sledge of martyrdom.

And the making of martyrs has continued for all the days since then, to our own time: Pakistani health workers, murdered for trying to immunize

children against polio; Trayvon Martin, shot dead for walking in a white neighborhood after dark; Heather Heyer, run down by a car at a White-Supremacist rally.

But beyond such deaths, the ordeals of ordinary life, with its own pressures and curveballs, grind at people's humanity. There are those who have lost the only job they know; those whose finances were drained by health problems; those who have lost children to addictions from which they could not escape. It has become the lot of immigrants, who were in this country for decades, with family, friends and work, now deported thousands of miles away from what is actually their home.

This is the ordinary suffering, that surrounds us, tolerated or actually inflicted by the empire in which we live. And none of it is lost to God's view. Those who are able to cling to their hope of saving love in the midst of this regular pain and chaos are also the saints who have come through the great tribulation. They are all there. We are all there.

And where is this 'there' in which we seek to be joined with those who have gone before us? Dr. William Flippin points out that there is an ancient Latin phrase describing their place: *Coram Deo*. It means 'before the face of God'. Those gathered around the throne in *The Revelation* are *Coram Deo*, before the face of God. Those whose names we read today are *Coram Deo*. For them, there is now no separation between hope and fulfillment, no separation between their love and the completion of that love in God. Because we have loved them, we are a part of the love which they enjoy this day.

This is not something which cannot be experienced until after our death. We are invited in our Baptism to know this kind of presence now. I don't mean that we necessarily spend ourselves in constant good works, or give our last dollar to the poor. This means that we pay attention to the reality of God in our everyday lives.

We can learn much about this from Brother Lawrence, a man of a poor French family in the 17 century. He became a lay brother in a Descalced Carmelite monastery in Paris. Lay brothers were those who did not participate in all of the formal prayers, were not called to study as were the choir brothers, but were there to do whatever physical labor was needed by the community.

Brother Lawrence spent his life in the menial work of cooking meals, scrubbing pots and pans, repairing the brothers' sandals. And he spent that work in loving God at every moment. Over his life he became known

for his quiet sanctity. He said, " We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him...It is enough for me just to pick up a straw from the ground for the love of God." It was in these lowly tasks that he found himself standing Coram Deo – before the face of God, just as the gathered saints of the Heavenly Kingdom are described by John. Brother Lawrence found himself able to have the beginning of the resurrection life in the midst of menial work.

We can learn from his example and from that of all the saints before us – those whose names are known, those whose names are read this day and those known only to God. The Revelation of John is not really about the future. It's not really about tomorrow. It is about God working in us today, as God worked in the lives of all the saints gone ahead of us. So we are joined with that great crowd Coram Deo – before the face of God.

On this day, we remember our own Saints, gathered there in nearer proximity to God, and we celebrate their place before the throne.