

Sermon for Morning Prayer
All Saints Day

Lessons:¹

First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.²

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure is taken for misery, And their going from us to be utter destruction: but they are in peace. For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded: for God proved them, and found them worthy for himself. As gold in the furnace hath he tried them, and received them as a burnt offering. And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble. They shall judge the nations, and have dominion over the people, and their Lord shall reign for ever. They that put their trust in him shall understand the truth: and such as be faithful in love shall abide with him: for grace and mercy is to his saints, and he hath care for his elect.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Chapter of the Revelation of St. John the Divine.³

“And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever. And the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia. And a voice came out of the throne, saying,

Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God. And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹²
November 1, 2009.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xliv (PECUSA 1928/1943).

² *Wisdom* 3:1-9 (KJV).

³ Revelation 19:1-16 (KJV).

⁴ Revelation 19:9a (KJV).

⁵ Revelation 19:7-9 (KJV).

⁶ St. John 1:29 (KJV).

⁷ St. Matthew 22:1-14 (KJV)

⁸ St. Matthew 25:1-13 (KJV).

⁹ Revelation 19:9a (KJV).

¹⁰ *The Order for Morning Prayer*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 15 (PECUSA 1928/1943). This attests to the fact that "The Communion of Saints" is the Church."

¹¹ *Ibid.* 16. By a printer's error in 1549, the word "holy" was omitted from "the Marks of the Church" in the Nicene Creed in the very first BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER although not, significantly, from the Apostles' Creed. Such is Anglican conservatism that the error was repeated by rote in official printings down to the 1950s although it was restored orally by many congregations. The printed text of the Nicene Creed was restored to the historic form in the South African BCP in 1954 and in the Indian one in 1960.

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Development:

Let me repeat three verses from today's Second Lesson: "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God."⁵

There are two things about these three verses I wish to call to your attention today. First, please notice that twice the assemblage of the Church Triumphant – that is, the portion of the Communion of Saints that is already in fellowship with God in heaven – is likened to the marriage of the Lamb. The Lamb is, of course, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who is the Lamb of God. Thus St. John quoted John the Baptist as saying of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world."⁶

The image of a marriage or of a marriage feast as a figure for the Kingdom of Heaven, and therefore of the Church, hearkens back to Our Lord's metaphor that is recorded twice in several St. Matthew's Gospels, once in the parable of the wedding guest who came improperly dressed⁷ and again in that of the wise and foolish virgins.⁸

So the wedding feast that appears in St. John's vision is likewise a figure for the Kingdom of God and for the Church. Similarly, those who attend that banquet are the righteous, the saints.

That brings us to the second thing I would like you to notice in those three verses. The blessed do not happen to

drop in at the supper, as though the host were holding open house; instead, St. John expressly states they were *called*.⁹

To say that the guests – that is, the saints – that is, we, the members of the Church – are *called* is to say that our presence here is a *response* to someone else’s action. That someone else is, of course, the caller, who is Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The technical theological name for this call is “prevenient [*pre-VEEN-ee-ent*] grace”. That is a long Latin term for “the grace that comes before”, because it comes to us from Christ before we are moved to respond and turn to Him.

Thus far, all Christians should be in agreement. Our status as saints, our presence at the marriage feast, is because we responded to Christ’s invitation, not because we had the ability to get there by ourselves.

It is the next step over which Christians differ among themselves. Some of us say that, because Christ arranged the feast and called us to it, He set the terms and conditions of our being there. He set the menu and determined what we will eat; He, like the host in St. Matthew’s parable, declared what the guests must wear to it. If we do not conform to His directions, then we, like the improperly-dressed guest in the parable, will be hustled out the door. In this view, our choice is to attend on His terms or to stay away but we have no choice to change what goes on at or during that feast.

In the other view, the invitation is all that counts. Once we have been invited, we are free to get together with other like-minded invitees to form a sort of club. There, to facilitate our status as invitees, we can decide among ourselves what we will eat, what we will wear, what the entertainment at the feast will be. If the Host made stipulations we do not like – such as who is eligible to attend, or who will lead the feast – we are free to change those arrangements to others that are more to our own liking.

The first view, that we can only choose to attend on the Host’s terms or to stay away, is the one that has been held by the Universal Church from the time of the Church’s founding until the present day. The ancient term for “universal” was “catholic” so we may call this view of the nature of the Church “the Catholic position”.

The other view, that once we have been invited we can start altering the banquet arrangements, has cropped up at various times during the Church’s history. Each time except the most recent, it lasted as a minority belief for a time and then died out. Its most recent reappearance, in the 16th Century, is still with us and is one, although only one, of the features of most Protestant denominations. So we may, perhaps, for convenience call this view of the Church as optional “the Protestant position”.

Conclusion:

Most of the current difficulties in the Church can be traced to this difference, between those who see the Church as a divinely-established institution for those who have been divinely called into it, and those who see the Church as a human institution established by those who have been divinely called.

When we recite the Creeds, as we here do in every public service of the Church, we attest to our belief in either “the holy Catholic Church; The Communion of Saints”¹⁰ or in “one [Holy] Catholic and Apostolic Church”.¹¹ If we honestly mean what we say there, then, it seems to me, we must accept the Catholic position that the Church is a divine institution over which we have temporary stewardship but no ultimate control, and reject the Protestant position that the Church is a voluntary society operated for the pleasure and benefit of its members.