

All Saints – There is a vast multitude with us today

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All Saints – Rev 7 9-17

The book of Revelation was written in a time of terrible persecution for the early Church the outsiders of their time. It's a book willed with visions and dreams, with hope and resilience; but only for those with eyes to see. Revelation has only ever spoken to them; people who can crack its code and find hope and resilience in it. The persecutors of the early Church would have drawn a complete blank.

Often, in times of great suffering, someone will emerge from amongst a sad and frightened people – someone with a vision. This visionary can see something that nobody else can – it's their gift. The visionary isn't blind to the day-to-day pain and misery that everyone's going through; anything but – they're in it too. Yet they're given a vision – a vision which can lift a suffering people's eyes from their misery, and fix their gaze on something better, so that suddenly, their perspective changes.

When perspective changes, nothing tangible changes, and yet everything changes. Suddenly people believe in change. Then the suffering and misery they endure, and the hatred that poisons their lives are no longer their defining boundaries. Without being physically or emotionally set free, people's spirits are nevertheless released. They're given their full humanity back – but given it in a secret way – in a secret place that their persecutors can't reach. That's what the writer of Revelation gave to a persecuted Church; that's what visionaries still give people in our time.

So if much of the book of Revelation is opaque to us, maybe

it's just that we're waiting for the right time to read it – let's pray that we're spared that time. Revelation is written in a sort of code. Let's crack it open a bit. ^{7.9} ... *I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.* How does that bring hope to persecuted Jewish and Gentile Christians?

Do you remember the promise God made to Abraham – Genesis 12.3 – *in you, all families of the earth shall be blessed*? Here it is pictured as fulfilled.

What's being said here is that persecutors can do what they like, but in the end, what God has promised is what goes. Revelation goes further – *all tribes and peoples **and languages***: languages. This goes back further – to the tower of Babel, where God confused the languages of the people. This vision sees all that division reversed – what was broken gets mended in this vision. So wounds in the Christian community – divisions and misunderstandings – are also going to be healed.

The verse goes on; this multitude is *standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands*. These people are in God's presence – in the presence of the Lamb. Jesus, the one who was killed but is now alive again, is enthroned in splendour. And the multitude is robed in white, the robe of martyrs – of those who witnessed with their lives – the robe of the baptised.

"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter (pitch the divine tent over) them.

So these persecuted, martyred ones are resurrected too, and they're bearing palm branches. What people waved for Jesus on

his road to the cross, they wave still, having travelled that road themselves to death and resurrection. What the palms proclaimed of Jesus' royalty then is vindicated for them now, where all is fulfilled.

Can you see how subversive this writing is? Can you see how it would give heart to people who know martyrdom? And at the same time it confounds their persecutors utterly? It's a secret language – a precious gift – a language of indomitable hope.

This subversive passage is set for this feast of All Saints to remind us that our defining reality is not suffering and death, but the healing and life which God chooses to give to and through all the nameless little people – the glorious nobodies – who've handed our faith down to us. ¹⁷ *...the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.* There is a vast multitude with us today who've carried us and whom we carry inside us. We worship God with them today.