The CATHEDRAL of ST. PHILIP
SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

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You are the One Who Knows

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
All Saints' Day

It is a feast day in heaven.

John looks, and he sees a crowd so large that no one can count it. They come from every nation, from every tribe and people and language, and they stand shoulder to shoulder before the throne. They are robed in white and holding palm branches. And they are singing, loudly enough that the angels fall on their faces and join in.

Then one of the elders turns to John and asks him a question: “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

It is a strange question. The elder already knows the answer; he has stood before that throne all along. John has only just arrived. But John answers honestly: “Sir, you are the one who knows.”

Hold on to that answer. We will need it again before we are done.

The elder answers his own question. “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.”

Washed white in blood?

Anyone who has tried to get a stain out of a white shirt knows how strange that sounds. Blood doesn’t make anything white. If these robes are white, someone else made them so. Their brightness is a gift. It is what grace looks like when it shines through a human life.

That is what we celebrate today. All Saints is the Church’s great thanksgiving for the people in whom we have watched the grace of God at work. We give thanks for that grace, and we take heart from it.

So let us try to answer the elder’s question, at least in part. Who are these?

This Wednesday the Church remembers one of them, Adeline Blanchard Tyler. In 1861 she was running a church infirmary in Baltimore. When war came, she nursed the wounded, Union and Confederate alike, in military hospitals until her own strength gave out.

Most of us have never heard of her. But this week the Church’s calendar sets her between Richard Hooker, one of the great minds of our tradition, and William Temple, an Archbishop of Canterbury. A nurse among the giants, in the same white robe.

She walked straight into the great ordeal. And there, among the wounded, the brightness showed.

That is the second thing the elder tells us: these have come out of the great ordeal. Their brightness showed in the thick of things: in hospitals and in prisons, at kitchen tables and by sickbeds.

It showed on ordinary days, too. Most of that multitude have names we will never learn. We know some of them all the same: the grandmother who prayed for us by name, the teacher who saw something in us before we saw it ourselves, the friend who sat beside a hospital bed and simply stayed. We have seen the brightness in them. We know what it looks like.

And here is the encouragement. Their robes got dirty, just as ours do. And they knew where to take them.

The saints are the people who kept bringing their robes to be washed.

They came back to the Lamb again and again, and each time the brightness returned. Holiness, it turns out, is the habit of returning. It looks like the confession we say together every Sunday. It looks like the apology we finally make, the prayer we pray when we have nothing left to offer, the hands we hold open for bread. It grows on an ordinary Tuesday. It grows in us.

Which brings us to the font.

This morning the baptismal candidates will come to the water. They will be washed. They will be marked with the cross and sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked as Christ's own forever. In the early Church, the newly baptized came up out of the water and were dressed in a white garment, and they wore it all through Easter week. They were dressed to join this very crowd.

As we gather around the font, the elder's question comes to us. Who is this? Who will this child become? What will this life look like in twenty years, or seventy?

We do not know. So we give John's answer: *You are the one who knows*.

The First Letter of John puts it with great tenderness: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him."

We cannot say what these newly baptized will become. But we can say what they are. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

That is what we are. We are that before any of us has done anything worth celebrating. The robe comes first, and the life grows into it.

So the saints are people like us who kept growing into their robes. And we join the multitude the same way they did: by being washed, and coming back to be washed again.

Now listen to how the vision ends. "The Lamb at the center 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."

Springs of the water of life.

The water in our font this morning comes from that spring. It flows from the throne of the Lamb, through the whole communion of saints, into this little font. The great multitude drinks from it now, standing before the throne, seeing face to face. This is what Jesus promised on the mountain: the pure in heart will see God. They are not as far from us as we think. An old hymn by Charles Wesley says that we are one family, one Church above and beneath, divided only by a narrow stream. Today that stream runs through this nave.

In a moment we will stand and renew our own baptismal vows. Say them with the whole multitude listening, because they are. Adeline Tyler is there, along with the grandmother who prayed for you, and every saint whose name only God knows. They are waving their palms. They are glad to see us.

And if the elder were to look down at this crowd, at the cathedral full of ordinary people in stained robes gathered around a little water, and ask, "Who are these?"

We could give no better answer than John's: *You are the one who knows*.

Christ does. He knows every name in this crowd; he marked each one of us as his own. And the Lamb will lead us home.

Amen.

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