

All Saints Sunday, November 1st, 2020.

Rev 7:9-end – main passage

Also Matthew 5:1-12

We've all missed gathering with our church to worship during lockdown. But, as hard as that's been, it has helped us appreciate the religious freedom we enjoy that countless people around the world have never known. In India, many can't gather to pray in their homes, for fear of attack. In China, even Christians who join online services risk arrest. This is the Real Lockdown, and it's not just temporary.

This is a video from the Christian human rights organisation Christian Solidarity Worldwide. It is creation, using actors, but using real life situations, for what Church can look like for persecuted believers today.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGuGVU5Uhjw>

Over 1 in 8 Christians today – 260 million – experience high levels of persecution in their Christian lives. Revelation describes a persecuted Church.

Revelation 7. Not for the first time, John has an interlude. It is part of one vision from chapter 4. He has described the sixth seal being opened, it ends with the phrase. 'who can stand?' is what the kings, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, every slave, every free person hides and asks...who can stand before God and the Lamb...?

Then John sees something else, he hears the call for a seal, and he looks. Two multitudes. One before tribulation. Second, when tribulation is over – saved, safe, in the kingdom of God. This second multitude. So great – no one can count. A great multitude not from one nation, or the Roman Empire – remember John shares his vision in the days that Rome as the and only superpower across the known world – a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people language.

Who can stand before the Throne and the Lamb. ? The rich, the powerful, the famous, the unknown, the slaves, the free ask . Those who can stand are “Those, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ” The Blood of the lamb – a direct expression, for the death of Christ which is a sacrifice for sins. ” Forgiveness of sins is through faith in the Christ who died for all. His redemption is effective – the robes are washed, made white. Who can stand? Many can stand. Where from? Every where! How can they stand. Through the Blood of the Lamb - the actions of Christ, his death and resurrection.

It reminds us of one of the reasons why **All Saints is called All Saints**. This name was chosen in 2015 before the church was planted.

“There was a multitude”. Saints are not only those who have died but those who are alive too. As Paul writes for example to Christians in Corinth: To the Church of God in Corinth together with all the saints throughout Achaia. He was saying – to these Christians in Corinth – who were struggling to work out what it meant to be a Christian, since they discovered Christ as Lord and Saviour – first generation Christians. To be a Christian is to be a saint.

He says they are saints – by identity – not by their action – as are the other Christians in the region, they are saints too. So, when we called All Saints All Saints, it was saying – you gathered today, whatever age, background, nationality – you, whether you feel like it or not – are saints, and why are you a saint, because of the blood of the Lamb. That means – you joining us today from other churches – as Christians you too are saints!

Finally we chose the name All Saints – because it reminded us, not only who were saints, how we are saints, but also how we are called to live – as saints – to live as saints, as ones: who see that salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb, to declare to no one else does salvation belong. To live as people of praise, for who God is. To live as servants of God.

All Saints Day not only reminds us of those who have fallen asleep in Christ and who wait for the great resurrection, it not only points us to the many more who will become saints – for not every nation, tribe, people or language is represented yet in the great people of God, there are peoples, tribes, to be reached with the gospel – All Saints reminds us of who we are...

Tribulation.

Who are these people John in the vision asks. The elder tells him. They have come out of the great tribulation. This idea is within the New Testament and goes back to Daniel 12: 1 - "There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then..." Distress - the Greek word is tribulation. Jesus re echoed these words in his teaching on the last days. Matthew 24. "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again..." John in Revelation describes Satan – described as a dragon - who will attack those devoted to Christ. There will be a beast, supported by a false prophet, he will demand the multitudes worship him. The beast for a time, will be allowed "to make war against the saints and to conquer them." Those who refuse to worship, the punishment is death (13:15).

Jesus' ministry had much conflict with Satan and his demonic powers. Yet by his incarnation, earthly mission, cross, resurrection, a decisive defeat was given to Satan. It means – as Colossians 1 reminds us: as a saint, God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col 1:13-14).

The Church is delivered from the spiritual power of Satan, we are in the Kingdom of the Son, but the church then, now, and until Christ's return – is not spared from tribulation and persecution, which flows from Satan's hatred for the people of God. This is where we connect to the persecuted Church.

A true story, years ago, an American pastor was visiting China and spoke with a Chinese house church leader. He asked him what his favourite

book of the Bible was. The Chinese pastor said – Revelation. The American jumped in – because of your suffering it gives you the confidence and hope it gives you of the end, the victory of Christ. Yes, said the Chinese pastor – but not only of how things will be, but of how things are now. He went on to share, while the American saw Revelation only as a point in a dim future describing of how the world would end, the Chinese house church pastor and his colleagues so it describing how things were now. They saw how Satan, through the Chinese structures – Mao – a Caesar who called for worship, he used a beast the Communist state, the false prophet - the leaders they manipulated into positions in churches – were the dragon, the beast, the false prophet at work. When it didn't work, then, the Chinese house church leader said, when they resisted the idolatry with the word of the testimony and the blood of the lamb. They were slaughtered, and imprisoned.

Satan isn't interested in waiting, he is working now upon breaking apart the church. Revelation speaks not only of how things will be but how things are now.

It is striking for us to remember. Most of the New Testament is written by persecuted Christians to persecuted Christians. Revelation included. The saints of today – in the persecuted parts of our church – can help us understand more clearly perhaps, more deeply parts of the scriptures that we may miss.

A true story. Ron Boyd Macmillan who works for Open Doors shared how he remembered years ago, a pastor from the West, who was preaching about Jesus stilling the storm in Mark 4. The pastor's whole talk was about how Jesus could still the storms in our lives – storms like loneliness, misunderstanding, humiliation, persecution even. And he said: 'And Jesus can deliver you from every one of these storms, just like he did the disciples of old.' He was about to continue. When an old man stood up. He was from a Middle Eastern Country and had seen much suffering. He said gently, respectfully – 'My dear brother, if you had been persecuted, you would know the primary meaning of this passage. The point of this story is not that Jesus takes the storm away, but that there is no need to fear the storm if Jesus is in the boat.'" Everyone in the room

stared at the man in silence. He added: "This passage is given to us for our comfort in the face of terrible storms, to know that Jesus is in the boat with us so that the storm will do us no harm."

So, as Ron concludes: that persecuted Christian, because he was or had been persecuted – knew the meaning of the passage better than the pastor, because this man was the type of person the passage was originally written for. The persecuted enable us in some way, to recover the original eyes of the first writers and readers of Scripture and that can only help us. (Story quoted from page 493 and 94 of *Standing Strong through the Storm*).

The word tribulation. '*Philipis*.' Used in our passage. John also uses for himself. He begins his letter: I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering – *philipis* – tribulation – and kingdom and patient and endurance that are ours in Jesus.'

Tribulation is the normal expectation of the church in the world. For example, in John 16:33, Jesus tells them: I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble – tribulation - *philipis*. But take heart! I have overcome the world.' At the end of Paul's first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul it is written, returned to the cities in Turkey they had preached and help plant churches. They "strengthened the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith "We must go through many hardships – tribulations – *philipis* – to enter the kingdom of God." Also, last week we focused on Acts 11, 'Now those who had been scattered y the persecution in connection with Stephan travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch...' You have guessed it, the word for persecution is *philipis*. One final example, in the beautiful well known words of Romans 8:31-39, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? The word for trouble is *Philipis*. It was a daily experience or a likely experience for the Roman Christians for Paul to have originally shaped such words. Of course, not many years later, came the cruel persecution of Nero, during which Peter and Paul would both be martyred. The great tribulation in Revelation 7, will be, but a concentration, I would argue, of

the same satanic hostility which the church has experienced throughout her entire existence. The great tribulation, that final effort by him and his hordes to turn the hearts of God's people from their Lord.

Persecution comes to the saints of today – not just the saints of tomorrow. In fact, in his final letter, Paul as he is in prison, expecting he is in his final months, he says Timothy knows and remembers all Paul went through. Then he says 2 Timothy 3:12 – “in fact everyone, who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Story.

Ron van der Spoel, who some of you know well, told the story to a group of us, when he was visiting pastors in Bhutan. One of the pastors asked Ron, how he is persecuted in the Netherlands. He thought and then said, he wasn't. There was quietness in the room. Then an older pastor from Bhutan said: that means two things – that God loves you more than us, or there is a problem: everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.' The wise Bhutanese Pastor spoke words that Ron saw as wisdom – the church will encounter persecution. Of course how it looks in one country will be different from another. That is what we can learn from the persecuted, how they are persecuted, how we can be. That means not looking at the top 10 in the World Watch List, where it seems so different but perhaps paying extra attention as we begin next week with the final 10 countries – 40-50 of the list – whose experience is closer to our own.

In fact. What the Bhutanese pastor said perhaps points us to another fact.

We are all part of the persecuted church.

That we are all part of the persecuted church – it is just a measure of degree. You see, in Rev 7, the multitude are wearing white robes. Who are they, the elder asks? The elder answers his own question –they are those who came out of the great tribulation. The great tribulation which affected nation, tribe, people, language, **the entire church**. Jesus own teachings seem to say – we belong to the persecuted church. In fact, the Beatitudes. When he describes the kingdom lifestyle, he says: Blessed

are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Then he develops it – the only line he goes back to. It catches our eye. Like the Lord's Prayer – we read it, then Jesus returns to the theme of forgiveness – it matters forgiveness he says. Here, at the start of the sermon, he returns to persecution: 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecuted you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'" It will happen. He repeats. You will walk in the footsteps of the great OT prophets he says. Not just in how God worked through them and his word had effect, but also in the way they were treated.

You see, if you declare that Salvation belongs to God and the Lamb, and live that out. If you praise God as creator and not another god. If you seek to serve him day and night. If you hold to the fact that only through the blood of the lamb you can stand before God and the Lamb. We will come into persecution eventually. That is what the saints of the church teach us. Wherever we are, we are in a battle, a persecutor is after us, wherever there are, there are forces of evil who want us to make a mess of church. So the persecuted church shows us his tactics. If they want to stop the church in North Korea, in China, in Africa, in Latin America, they want to stop it here in the West.

Hope.

The passage from Revelation ends beautifully doesn't it. It echoes very strongly Isaiah 49:10. Those who experienced tribulation and suffering, were secure. Even though Satan through the Beast, false prophet, is allowed to wage terrible tribulation against the saints, God will bring them safely and victoriously through into the kingdom of God. They are secure because they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.

What they will experience. The one who sits on the throne, will spread his tent over them. The word throne – God was ruler. The image. Tent. God was protector. There is Divine protection for them. Nothing will ever hurt them again. Divine provision is followed by divine provision. No hunger. No thirst. Nor will the sun burn them. The lamb – he was

introduced as the lamb who looked like he was slain – the once slain lamb – now shepherds the heavenly multitude. The lamb turned shepherd will lead the once persecuted, suffering, to springs of living water. He will bring eternal refreshment to them. It reminds us of the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 23.

And He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Eternal peace, healing, rest, hurts restored and the compassion of the Lamb shown and his closeness – as a person once said, how close do you need to be to wipe away tears... A beautiful image. Reassurance for the believers in John's day of the security and the experience of the those who had fallen asleep in Christ. Reassurance of what John said for those saints, what will be turn for us.

This is a glimpse of the kingdom. The hope for all the saints.

Shall we pray...