

“Who are these, clothed in white robes?” This is the question an elder puts to St. John as he is shown a vision of the saints in glory. After seeing the 144,000 – representing the Church Militant still on earth – John sees an innumerable number of people clothed in white robes standing before the throne of God in heaven. This is the Church Triumphant, all those who have died with a living faith in Jesus in their hearts, and who now live eternally in glory.

Their blessedness is something we’ll touch on in just a moment, but first I want to address the second part of the question that the elder asks, because I think it shows all the more clearly the wonderful hope that is ours in Christ.

“Who are these, clothed in white robes... and from where have they come?” The questions are connected, obviously, as where a person comes from will tell you something about who that person is. So, how did all these white-robed people get to this glorious place?

John replies that the elder knows better than he does, and indeed the elder answers and says, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.” They have come through suffering and through sadness. At the simplest level, they all have come through death. All those whom John sees around the throne of the Lamb have died.

This really stuck out to me as I was thinking both about this text and then how we often think of death, especially with the recent celebration of Halloween. Now, there’s a lot of fun that can be had with Halloween. Taking your kids trick-or-treating while dressed in fun costumes is great, as is handing out candy to those who come to visit. The only downside might be looking at the receipt after buying Halloween candy.

And historically, All Hallows Eve was simply like Christmas Eve, the beginning of the Feast of All Saints where the Church gave thanks for all those who had died and were now with Christ in heaven. Contrary to pagan nonsense you might hear, Christians have been celebrating All Saints Day – and All Saints/Hallows Eve – since at least the fourth century, whereas the Celtic pagan festival of Samhain from which Halloween supposedly came has its earliest mentions in the 10th or maybe 9th centuries.

Yet despite its sacred and joyful origins, what is Halloween for a lot of people in our culture, in our community, today? What is being celebrated, or honored, or remembered? What is a person to think of or feel when he sees the giant grim reapers and skeletons? Or the yard decorations of corpses, evil clowns, and buckets full of dolls’ heads? Or the blood and gore on costumes worn by the children who come to your door asking for candy? It would seem that these are celebrations of fear, and pain, and especially death.

Again, this isn’t to say that all Halloween celebrations and decorations are like this, but there’s no denying that many are, and more each year. Why is perhaps the second-most visible holiday in our town – in terms of decorations and events and so forth – focused so much on glorifying death?

Now I obviously cannot see into everyone's hearts, so this next part might be a little sanctified speculation, but there's a little bit of reason and Scripture behind it. Apart from Christ, every person is doomed to die. We are born spiritually dead, and eventually our bodies will die as well.

And death is the common fate for all men. Aside from the two saints Enoch and Elijah, every single person who has ever entered this world has died or will die. It doesn't matter how much money a person has, or how good his medical care is, or how many people love him; eventually he'll die. Eventually, you all will die. Dust you are, and to dust you will return.

Since death is inevitable, what is a person without Christ to do? I would say that for many, the attitude is, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" If I celebrate death, then I can fool myself into thinking that it's okay, it's no big deal, maybe even that it's a good thing. If I celebrate or mock death, maybe I won't be so scared when it actually comes.

But the Bible says otherwise. In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom says, "but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death." Or the Lord Jesus tells Nicodemus, "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." Glorifying darkness, and fear, and death might seem to give some people relief or even joy in this life, but it can do nothing to save them from the eternal darkness, fear, and death that awaits.

There is one death that is worth greatly honoring, though, because it's the death that brings life. This is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. There Jesus suffered horror and fear and pain beyond anything we could come up with. Yet by His great power, He used His dying to destroy death. With His last breath, He spoke those words that shattered the power of hell and the devils: "It is finished."

On the third day, the Father raised His Son, making a true mockery of death, rather than what we see in Halloween decorations. His holy angel tossed aside the stone that was meant to contain Christ and then sat on it in victory. Christ neatly folded His face cloth and set it on the stone bench where He'd laid, showing that He was in no hurry to escape a spooky tomb, but was calm and even making the bed before leaving.

Our Lord then disguised Himself, not as some gross, bloody abomination, but by His holy power, so that even Mary Magdalene and two disciples walking to Emmaus didn't know who He was at first. He arrived in the midst of His fearful disciples, not bothering to knock on their locked door, and gave them the gift of divine peace. And He was no ghostly apparition, proving that by having Thomas put his fingers in the nail marks and his hand into His side. This wasn't a gory spectacle to bring fear, but a holy sign to bring awe. The story of Easter is truly the greatest mockery of death, for it shows how totally our Lord has conquered death.

That leads back to the scene in Revelation. Here we see a bunch of people who have died. But because they died believing in Jesus, they live, and will live forevermore! St. John beholds not a scene of fear and sorrow, but of peace and joy. The saints aren't a bunch of zombies or skeletons, but stand before the Lamb in perfected bodies made whole by the power of God. They are not in some dark,

oppressive realm, but in the light-filled temple of God. They do not hear cries of sorrow or terror or pain, but only the endless songs of praise and thanksgiving, the worship of angels and men blending and echoing throughout the golden halls of the New Jerusalem. Death has been transformed by our God from a pit of despair into a doorway to paradise.

Therefore, we as God's people are blessed with the right understanding of death. Joined to Christ, we mock death with the words of St. Paul: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" When we attend the funerals of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we need not fear. We mourn, because we miss them, because we love them. But we know that they are around the throne of the Lamb, some of the countless host seen by St. John. And we know that we will see them again. Our Lord tells us, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

The blessedness of God is not just exclusive to the saints in heaven, either, though they enjoy the full measure of it. Though we are in tribulation now, our God will bring us through it as He has promised. As God's people, called sons of God by Him, we need not fear death, or anything else in this life. The King of creation will ensure that we are provided for and protected during our time on this earth. The God of light will shine His light upon us even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The Lord of angels will send His heavenly servants to guard and keep us, that the wicked foe may have no power over us. Though you may not always be able to see or feel the Lord's blessing, it is there, because He has promised it by His unbreakable word.

On All Saints Day, then, we give thanks, not for death, but for our God and Savior who has overcome the power of death. We know that as He died and yet lives eternally, so also do all live who died in Him. And as He is the Lord of all, we know that He will preserve us throughout all our days in this life until He calls us to receive the full measure of His blessedness. We need not fear death, nor glorify it, for we fear and glorify the God who will bring us through the darkness of death into His marvelous light.

In the name of Jesus, amen.