

November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
All Saints Day  
Rev. 7:9-17, 1 John 3:1-3, Mt. 5:1-12  
“A Great Crowd”

Have you ever been in a large crowd, I mean, a really large crowd? Some people gather in crowds for the strangest reasons. For instance, the largest crowd to gather for the purpose of blowing bubbles, met in Upton Park, London, in May 1999; 23,680 people assembled there and blew bubbles all at the same time. Some people go shopping in spite of the crowds. 1.07 million people shopped in a single department store in one day on December 20, 1995 in Shanghai, China.

The largest crowd to be "slimed" is 731. Yes, on March 12, 1999 in Birmingham, England, 840 litres of slime was poured upon 731 people in a fundraiser event. It is believed that the greatest number of spectators for any sporting event is 10 million over a three-week period at the annual Tour de France cycling race.

Most of us, I dare say, try to avoid crowds. You see on TV a mass of bodies packed in front of a stage watching a pop group and we say to ourselves, "I'm glad I'm not in the middle of that."

Young people who have been to "The Big Day Out" concerts in Australia or Lollapalooza concerts in the States say that they are so crowded that once your hands are up in the air they have to stay up in the air because people are packed in so tightly around you.

Most of us shudder at that kind of thing, but for those in a crowd like that, they think nothing of it. In fact, they enjoy being there – the people, the atmosphere, the music and the crush are part of the fun of the day.

All over the world, people gather in large crowds for many purposes, but as exciting as some of those gatherings might be, they all pale into insignificance compared to the huge crowd of Revelation 7.

Try to imagine this giant crowd of people in heaven. People from every walk of life, every culture, every nationality - so many people that they cannot be numbered.

This isn't one of those uncomfortable crowds; people pushing and shoving, people jammed in together, some being rude, and some stepping on your toes. Those gathered at the throne of God don't mind the crowd at all.

In fact, they are happy to be part of so many people enjoying the presence of God. They come from all kinds of backgrounds, even speak different languages, but here there is no division. They understand one another perfectly; they are as one.

I remember coming to Thunder Bay a couple of times, one for a convention and one for a youth gathering and the worship services for both those events were spectacular. Gathering together as a huge crowd at the University of Thunder Bay Auditorium to sing and worship the praises of God was something that was very memorable and to be in the presence of so many people worshipping God was amazing.

But again, that is nothing compared to the crowd gathered around the throne – the worship, the singing, the atmosphere, the joy will really be out of this world. John, the writer of Revelation, had seen a vision of what heaven is like and he is trying to put into words what he saw.

There are no words that can adequately describe what is beyond this life and the heavenly joy that belongs to all those who will gather around the throne of God and even though a large percentage of our population believe that there is a heaven, what they mean when they speak of heaven is really quite unclear.

There are so many wrong ideas about what happens after death, so much speculation, and so much fantasy and fiction about the mystery of it all. Writers and moviemakers have had a field day presenting all kinds of images of what happens after death - some pleasant, some horrifying.

Others pass it all off. They say heaven is a trick used by Christians to make people feel better about their death, or a prop to help them cope with the death of a loved one. They believe that there is nothing after death – that's called annihilation.

Some say that a selected number will live forever on a renewed planet. Others believe in reincarnation, the transmigration of souls, which means coming back again as someone or something else.

The church, however, teaches a personal, once only resurrection to eternal life. This is based, from Scripture, on our belief in a personal God, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believers in Christ have the sure knowledge death is not the end but the beginning of a new life in heaven.

Death has been so much a part of our world news lately. October 7 and the bomb blasts in Israel, the endless stories of gun violence and the senseless killing of innocent life. The ever present threat of war is always in the news so there's no escaping it – death is truly a part of our daily lives.

It's interesting how we work hard to try and avoid the subject of death. We don't even have undertakers anymore because it's too morbid. We have 'funeral directors', as if somehow we could manage or direct this inevitable reality that rips our lives apart.

The only answer to death and its power in this world is ...Jesus Christ. He died and rose again to defeat the hold that death has over us. He has promised that all who believe in him, trust him, put their confidence in him, will have eternal life. Death will not have the last say but we will have the joy of entering heaven.

So what do we know about heaven? It's a place very **different** from anything we know. Different in a good sense. In John's vision of heaven, we are told that standing before the throne of God, were those who had been through terrible persecution. They had experienced pain, suffering, the loss of loved ones and the loss of property.

We may not experience persecution but we suffer in different ways – we suffer illness, pain, discouragement, failure, disappointment, anxiety, catastrophes. In heaven, these things will not bother us any longer.

The hope of eternal life has helped many people in difficult times. It has given people a reason to live as well as confidence for what lies beyond the grave. Paul had this same feeling.

Listen to him: *"We are often troubled, but not crushed; perplexed, but sometimes in doubt but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt, we are not destroyed...This small and temporary trouble we suffer will bring us a tremendous and eternal glory, much greater than the trouble. For we fix our attention, not on things that are seen, but on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but what cannot be seen lasts for ever" [2 Cor 4:8,9,17,18].*

The vision of heaven kept Paul's troubles in perspective. His troubles were only passing events, but the joy of heaven was forever. With that in mind he could endure anything.

How many times have we sat with those whose time on this earth has been limited yet they demonstrate amazing calmness? They knew where they were going.

They focused on the joy that lay ahead of them when their Saviour will welcome them home with open arms. They looked forward to the perfect healing they will receive in heaven - their suffering be over. As Paul said, "The troubles of this life are small and temporary compared to the great and eternal joy of heaven."

Irene was a 66 year old lady who was confined to hospital for the last four weeks of her life. She knew her end was near. She asked to see her friends and family. When her visitors seemed uneasy, or they started to tell her that things weren't anywhere as near as bad as she thought, she very calmly, yet strongly assured them, "We don't have anything to be afraid of. Parting is difficult. But I'm going to be with my Lord. So let's cry for a while and then enjoy our time together."

Just as Irene could rejoice in this life, it is clear that heaven will be a place of never-ending **rejoicing**. Those who gather around the throne celebrate their new life in heaven and praise the God who has made it possible for them to enjoy such a place.

It is the Lamb – Jesus – who has given every believer the key to eternal life. Heaven is a perfect place and it is not possible for any sinner to enter it. We would be doomed forever if Jesus had not died to destroy the power of our sin. He has made us perfect and holy.

Remind yourself of God's Word where it says, *"Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb!"* What better reason is there for rejoicing.

Not only are people gathered around the throne of God but also angels are joining in that heavenly worship. They throw themselves down before the Lord saying, *"Amen! Praise, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honour, power, and might belong to our God forever and ever! Amen!"*

My friends, God is a **living God**. He has defeated the power of death. He is waiting for us and will welcome us to the joy of heaven on the day we leave this life. Our God is a living God – not an idea, a piece of stone or wood, a philosophy, a universal power but a living God who is real and wants all people to share in the joy of heaven.

He has made it possible for people of *every race, tribe, nation and language ... to stand in front of the throne of the lamb in heaven*. He wants all of us to be there. So imagine yourself among such a crowd of people before the throne.

Picture yourself celebrating and being part of the number of people that is so large, that you can't even number. Know in your heart that your place is reserved in the presence of God and you are there in the most holy place, in true worship and everlasting joy. Your eternal home.

Today, we are celebrating All Saints. This is a time to remember the saints who have gone before us – those who have been made clean by the blood of the Lamb and are now celebrating with that enormous crowd gathered around the throne of God.

Perhaps today reminds you of those special people in your life who have gone ahead. You remember with thanks what they have meant to you and praise God for their faith and the peace they are now experiencing.

All Saints is not only a time to reflect on the glories of heaven but also a time to re-examine and renew your relationship with Jesus and vow to do something about it if you have been distant and unresponsive to the love and forgiveness He is showing you. Let Him guide your life. Let Him take you by the hand and lead you. Let Him give you what you cannot give yourself and that is Peace.

All Saints reminds us that the troubles of this life are temporary and that the joys of heaven are eternal. All Saints calls us to reflect on our readiness and be prepared even if God were to call us from this life today. Inscribe on your heart today the words of Jesus where he says, *"I am going to prepare a place for you."*

A great day for a great crowd. So let us praise the God who has made the hope of heaven real for us through his Son Jesus because heaven is our home. May God bless us and keep us in Jesus' name. Amen.