

All Saints Sunday, Year A

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

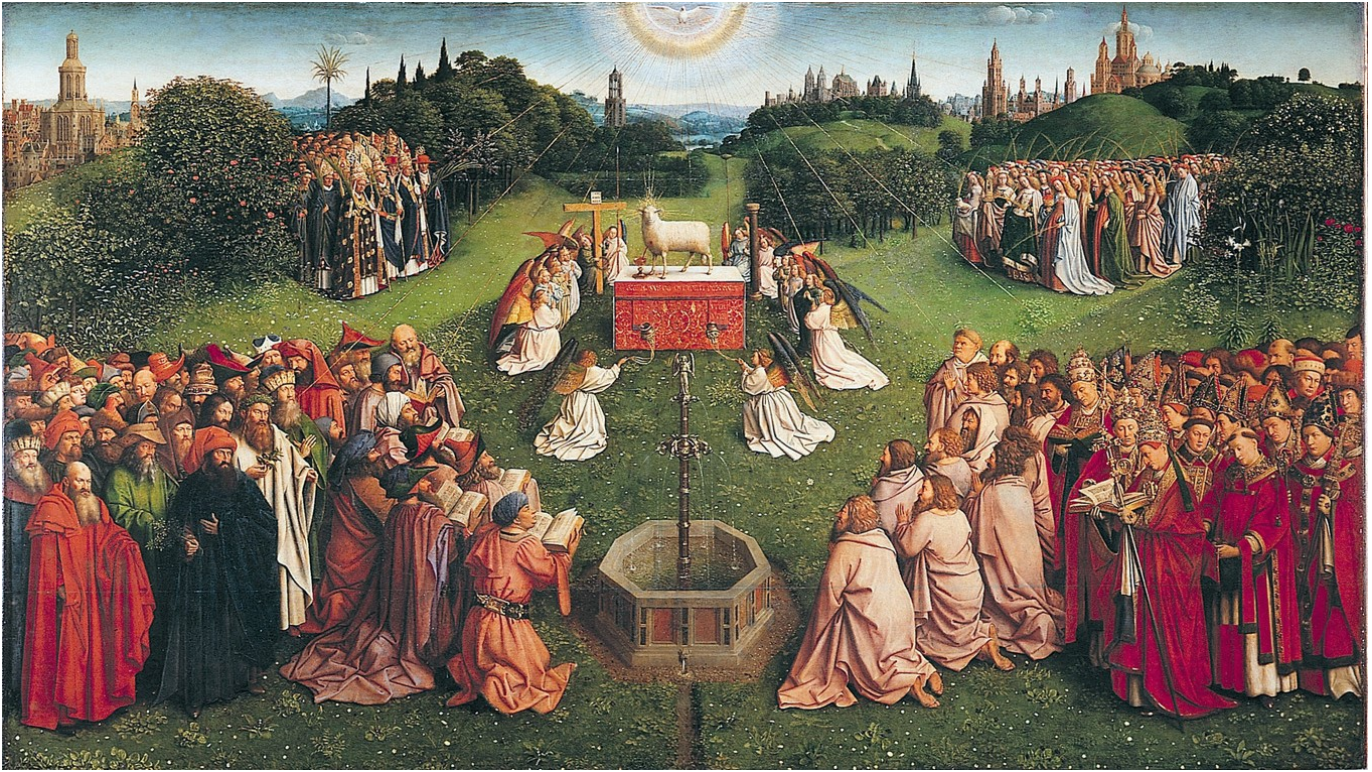
SALVATION BELONGS TO THE LAMB

Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints Sunday

Analysis by Fred Niedner

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." 13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "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. 15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 17 for 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."



Retable de l'Agneau mystique – Jan van Eyck (circa 1390–1441)
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“These are all the baptized, fresh daily from the grinding to dust and washing of renewal, clothed now in him, in his own crucified and risen flesh and blood.”

Diagnosis: Stumbling into the White-Robed Choir

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Tripping over Our Favorite Songs

Today we celebrate with all the saints. The great party has begun. We see the glorious procession, hear the singing, and can almost taste the lifted cup of jubilation in the vision given to St John. One thing we cannot discern – whether the hearts and minds of those white-robed choristers remember anything of what that curious elder inquires about, perhaps unwittingly, when he asks, “Who are these people? And from what or where do they come?” Whether they do or do not remember such things, we surely do, for in truth, we are those singers. Our lives today are

their backstory. And it pains us now to recall that we have sung this same song in the here and now, "Salvation belongs to the Lord," and then gone apoplectic when it appeared that this assertion might actually be true. Our brother Jonah, who had little else to do during his sobering sojourn inside a great fish, wrote a marvelous hymn of repentance. He capped off his song with that very line. But later, when the bloody Ninevites listened and God said, "Welcome home," amazing grace no longer sounded sweet. It reeked of betrayal. If God owns salvation, God has trashed it, and we don't want or need it.

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Inside the Unwashed Robes

More memories haunt us. Despite what Jesus said, suffering, persecution, revilement, and character assassination, even for the sake of righteousness and our association with him, don't automatically make one happy, blessed, or saintly. Rather, such things scare the hell out of us – or more likely into us. They grind us down. (That's what "tribulation" means – having your face scraped off, being ground into the dust.) Distress and mistreatment prompt sufferers to demand that God show up and explain this stinking mess (Job 29-31). The fed-up faithful who speak for God charge God with assault (Jeremiah 20:7ff.). When the powers that be start yelling, even rock-solid disciples become frightened enough to deny they ever knew the one who now shows up enthroned in St John's vision. Worn down to nothing, we have lost trust in everyone, including you, God. If tribulation is the road to happiness, bon voyage, sweet Lord! Enjoy the trip. Send us a post-card from whatever patch of earth the meek have actually inherited – if it's not in a cemetery.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): When Palm Branches Become Whips

The most memorable day in the history of St John's palm-branch-waving choir saw its members singing the Alleluia Chorus as we paraded up to Jerusalem behind the donkey-riding king. Yes, Judas later brought the soldiers to that garden, so he gets the rap for betrayal, but the entire choir changed its tune and we all sang with a mighty voice, "Away with him! Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!" We handed him over. With our palm branches, we waved him away. We don't need his mercy or his kind of peace. Another line from brother Jonah, in a song he never finished, comes to mind: "Our blood is boiling, God. We'd rather die than suffer your kind of mercy."



Volunteerism and Community Service in Ukraine, Author – U.S.

Prognosis: Righteous Redress

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Suffering God's Mercy, Together

And so we do. Die, that is. And yet we suffer God's mercy as well, forever, down here in the dust where our good looks, good names, and good works have all landed in the bonfire of our palm branches and blown away as smoke in the wind. Our faces are ashen, and no one can tell who's who, or who was who, except for the cruciform pattern of the ashes. Even our clothing looks uniform, all of it now washed in the blood of the Lamb we sent away to bleed out and die. He died with us and for us, so when we die, we die with him. Who are these people, this choir in St John's vision, and from where do they come? These are all the baptized, fresh daily from the grinding to dust and washing of renewal, clothed now in him, in his own crucified and risen flesh and blood. You can tell him, and now us as well, by the scars from the nails, by the tattle-tale tatters of our well-washed robes – Oh, the stories we could tell! – and by the occasionally visible mark of the cross on our foreheads.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Believing What We Sing

And you can recognize us by our singing. "Salvation belongs to God, and to the Lamb!" It does indeed, and for that we give eternal thanks. If anyone else "owned" salvation, we would be outside, beyond even the wilderness and outer darkness. We sing all this daily as a practice born of the Spirit's gift of faith and trust in God's mercy, the depth of love in God's tears on behalf of a broken world, the incomparable meekness of God

incarnate in Jesus Christ. We never sing alone, but in the company of all who have ever found themselves blessed and “happy” simply to have landed among the merciful, the company of peacemakers, and the pure in heart. If you can’t imagine our happiness, we’ll send you a post-card ... or better, a text, with a photo of our latest feast – a morsel of bread and sip of wine, shared with the countless host.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Midst All the Singing, Wiping Tears

That Lamb in St John’s vision is not content merely to sit happily, blissfully blessed, and enthroned on the songs of the white-robed choir. Rather, he still takes the role of servant. He shelters and shades, he feeds the hungry, leads thirsty souls to the water of life, and wipes the tears of those who still weep even as they peer into his face. Because his life is ours now (and ours his), we are all lambs of his flock, daily crucified with him and then from our cross-high thrones, just as he did, we give our lives as food and drink for the poor in spirit and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. With our daily washed sleeves, we wipe the tears of those who mourn, especially the tears of those who cannot be consoled by anything less than God’s own coming in flesh and blood to join them, hold them, and sing with them as they mourn.