



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for All Saints' Day
November 5, 2023

White Robes and Palm Branches

Matthew 5:1-12

¹Seeing the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

In our culture, people commonly expect funeral sermons to include a certain amount of praise for the person who died. Even Christians might be a little perturbed if they think that the preacher didn't fulfill this expectation, having not said enough about the deceased.

Certainly, the unbelieving world can, at its memorial services, remember many good things about its dead — as many good things as it likes. But God declares concerning the unbelieving world, "They have no hope and they are without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). Fond memories are the only source of comfort available when it comes to those who die outside the Faith. Unbelievers need to praise their dead because they have no one else to praise.

We, however, are not the unbelieving world. God has saved us *out* of the world by the blood of His Son.

In spite of this, many believers also expect the good works done by their Christian dead to be glorified at their funerals. Certainly, they could argue that their loved one produced many good fruits of faith in life, and those fruits offer a good deal of comfort in time of grief. And, to a certain extent, they have a point. We do like to point out the evidence of faith borne in the lives of our dearly departed. But the performance of works in and of itself can be misleading, as Jesus Himself repeatedly warns. In Matthew 23:27-28, for instance, He says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (ESV) And in Mark 7:6-7, He says, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with



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their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (ESV)

But, even at their best, good works are only a shadow of the bright and sunny things that *Jesus* has done for our Christian dead. In a funeral sermon, time spent discussing the good works of the deceased could actually take away from time spent proclaiming the Christ who created those good works (cf. Eph. 2:10). And what is preaching, anyway, funeral or otherwise? Hasn't God taught us in His Word that preaching is the proclamation of Christ and His crucifixion for the forgiveness of our sins, for our resurrection and life? (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23, Galatians 1:8).

So, what can be said of the departed Christian that both recognizes their deeds done in faith and glorifies the Savior for whom those deeds were done? In today's reading from the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John is asked by one of the Elders of heaven, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" (v. 13). It's a good question.

So, let us ask the question of our Christian dead. Who are these, whose caskets we place before the altar before we bury them in Christian Faith? Our text refers to them as

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"A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (v. 9-10)

With these Words, God wants us to know that our Christian dead are now speaking. They stand before the throne and before the Lamb; they cry out in a loud voice, but they choose not to speak about themselves. Pleading ignorance of their own works (cf. Matthew 25:31-46), our Christian dead now shout at the tops of their voices, with everything they have in their lungs, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (v. 10)

God wants us to know that our Christian dead are now clothed in white robes. Put another way, our Christian dead now wear the righteousness and holiness of Christ, just as you wear the holiness of Jesus even now. Those in heaven wear His good works, which cover and sanctify their own works. Everything about our Christian dead has been covered in Christ, just as you have been clothed and your children have been clothed with Christ in Baptism (cf. Galatians 3:27). The white robes of the saints in heaven perform roughly the same service for you as do the white robes of a pastor: they cover the person so that you can focus your attention exclusively on the proclamation of Christ.

Our Christian dead now hold palm branches in their hands. They don't hold résumés or service records or college transcripts or bibliographies or photo albums. They hold palm branches. Our departed faithful hold the very same symbols of victory that the people outside Jerusalem held before our Lord (John 12:12f), anticipating His crucifixion and



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heralding the good news of His resurrection.

Our Christian dead are standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Today is the Feast of All Saints'. In other words, we're coming down the home stretch. In just a few weeks we'll be at the end of another Church Year. This Year in the Church began, as it always does, with Advent – which is all about Christ and His gracious coming to us. Christmas and Epiphany are also about Jesus, rejoicing in the human and bodily presence of God in our midst. And what are the seasons of Lent and Easter, but a journey with Jesus to His bloody cross and empty tomb, where He "was put to death for our sins and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25)? Then came the season of Pentecost, the season we're in now, and in which we rejoice that Christ and His Holy Spirit continually live and dwell among us, producing within us the good fruit of faith. Simply stated, then, the entire Church year is all about Jesus and only Jesus (Luke 9:28-36).

So we should not think of today as a day in which we move our focus away from Christ in order to consider our Christian dead. No, what today really wants to impress upon us is that, when we fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2), we're not alone. Our Christian dead continue to look to Christ just as we do, for it's Christ who has saved both them and us. As happy as it will make us to look around on the streets of glory and find them in that crowd standing before our Savior, they will bid us rather to keep our eyes focused in the same direction in which they themselves continually and joyfully look, for they know – better than we this side of heaven can know – [they know] where true joys are found

A great multitude are they, that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and they are crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And we, too, beloved, will one day join them. Hallelujah! In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen