

The Feast of the Joyous Souls

2 November 2014, Memorial Sunday

Revelation 7:9-17. *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. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' 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, singing,*

'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' 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.'

*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.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
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.'*

In Singapore, where I grew up, one annual religious festival is the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts. Every fall, many Chinese people believe, the ghosts of their ancestors are released for a time from their eternal limbo in the spirit world and roam the earth, seeking to recapture the joy of physical life. So the people set out feasts and burn joss sticks – incense – so that their ancestors can enjoy at least the sight and smell of the world's pleasures. If they *don't* appease the hungry ghosts, then they might anger their ancestors' ghosts and bring bad fortune on themselves.

It all sounds fairly silly and superstitious to us, doesn't it? This is partly because in Western industrialized nations we've been trained to question anything that can't be measured in a laboratory and proven by the scientific method. But even those of us who believe in realities beyond the realm of scientific fact might have trouble with this festival. For me, it's not that the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts is silly so as that it is just sad. Compare the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts with the vision we just read from Revelation. Who are these who are robed in white? They are the spirits of those who have died. But what a difference is here! These souls are described as those who have already made it. They are not condemned to an eternity in spirit-limbo. No, *this* life is limbo, and these souls who have "come out of the great ordeal" have escaped it and have finally become real. The Hungry Ghosts look backward at this earth, but the Joyous Souls of this passage look onward and upward. The Hungry Ghosts yearn for a taste of what they have lost, but the Joyous Souls in white are being led by the Lamb to the springs of the water of life, where there will be no more tears.

But there is something about the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts that I have to respect. One underlying principle for this festival is respect for your elders. Cultures influenced by Confucian thought are emphatic about this: family is sacred, and elders are honored for their wisdom and experience and caring for them in their old age, and beyond, is a holy duty. The Chinese families I grew up among nearly all included a granny or grandfather who lived with them and formed a center of family gravity. The family and the person's

responsibility to it remains a powerful source of identity for the Chinese people. By contrast, we Westerners identify ourselves as individuals first and take our primary identity, not from our family or our relationships, but from our jobs. So we make our lives wherever we find our work, with the result that our families tend to be scattered all over the country and world. We no longer live in the same place as our aging parents and grandparents, and so of necessity we are not involved in their day to day care, when such care is needed. Nor do we benefit from their wisdom and experience when it be helpful. Now, to be fair, those aging parents and grandparents are also Westernized individualists, and very often prefer their own space to joining their children's households. My parents don't want to move in with me any more than I . . . let's just say that my parents and I really enjoy *visiting* each other.

So it's a different culture. But we western individualists can learn something from the family and community-minded cultures around us. We are connected, whether we always realize it or not. And we are especially connected to those who have gone before us and led the way – our parents, our grandparents, our spouses, our mentors, our teachers, our role-models. And as they have given so much to us, so we must periodically put aside our quest for individual identity and must return to them the loyalty and respect and care and remembrance that they have earned. We can learn that from the Confucian teachings of the East, and we can learn that from Revelation chapter 7, as we consider John's grateful vision of those who have led the way and who are now safely in the hands of the Lamb.

That's why we are here today on this All Saints' Day, this Memorial Service. We have gathered today to rejoice with those who have finally made it through this great ordeal and who are now in Christ's care. We have gathered today to console those who are still raw with the grief of their losses. And we are gathered today to remember that we are not just individuals but are connected to each other, across space and time and for eternity.

Let us pray.

Our God, we come before you in awe,

Amazed that you are present in this service, at this time, in our lives.

But amazed still more that you are equally present in every age, at every time,
in every life.

Before Abraham was, You Are.

We thank you that You Are

in the lives of the children of Israel, leading them, blessing them, chiding them.

We thank you that You Are

in the lives of the judges and kings, raising them up and empowering them.

We thank you that You Are

in the lives of the prophets, turning your people back to your righteousness.

We thank you that You Are

in the lives of the disciples and apostles, sending them, giving them words.

We thank you that You Are

in the life of the church – saints and popes, dissenters and reformers, hermits and kings, circuit riders
and monks.

We thank you that You Are.

And we thank you that You Are

in the lives of these we name this day,
and in the lives of those who remain behind,
who grieve at their passing, but who remember with gratitude.

We thank you that You Are

in the lives of those today who still live,
though we may live with pain, with sorrow, with brokenness.

We thank you that You Are. Not just that You Are here. Not just that You Are now.

Before any of us were, You Are.

Thank you. Amen