
Mystic Sweet Communion

Revelation 7:9-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 6, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

“I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more Redeemed.” So said the nineteenth-century atheist philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche. And it remains one of the most damaging criticisms of Christianity. Most of us have had moments, seasons, or even decades of being so ashamed of what has been done in the name of Christ and the church that we wonder if we can still truly belong to Christ, and still belong to the church. Many of us have felt profoundly let down by a person we looked up to or disillusioned by a form of Christian witness or horrified by the way a movement or culture has turned the faith into an excuse for manipulation, extortion, oppression or exploitation.

We know, in our heads, that just because Christians so badly struggle to live the good news, that doesn't mean the good news isn't true. We know that the good news is chiefly about our sins not being counted *against* us, rather than our sins being eradicated. But still, it's hard not to be with Nietzsche. The problem with the redeemer is that his followers don't look redeemed.

And it's just as true of ourselves. We may be deeply hurt by the church or resentful of God, but few of us swagger around thinking we're better than everyone else. More likely, we have a picture of what being a Christian is supposed to be like, and we're profoundly embarrassed that we don't reach anywhere near the mark. In my experience as a pastor, what keeps many people away from the church isn't laziness or being caught up in the busy-ness of life or even unbelief. The biggest thing that keeps people away is hurt, and the fear that we can't say these words and sing these songs and still hold back the tears or the anger any longer. And the second biggest thing that keeps people away is shame, and the terror that if we get involved in a community of faith people will really see who we are and they'll be appalled. We could say, “I might believe in the Redeemer if I looked more Redeemed.”

One spiritual writer [Léon Bloy] said, “There's only one sadness: the sadness of not being a saint.” It's true. Half our troubles come to us from others, and if we had grace of heart, and perseverance of spirit, and generosity of nature, those troubles wouldn't get us down the way they do. The other half of our troubles are those we bring on ourselves, and if we had transparent goodness, and lived in unblemished truth, and our souls were ones of inner beauty, then surely those troubles would diminish or disappear. There is indeed only one sadness: the sadness of not being a saint. All other sadnesses are versions of this.

Now for all of us there's times when we'd rather be left alone in our sadness than allow anyone near us who said they wanted to make us happy. But unless we've completely lost the joy, our hope is to fill out the sails of life like a wind blowing a boat to its maximum speed. An early theologian [Irenaeus] said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” When we reflect on our own shortcomings and resentments, what we're doing is perceiving the ways in which we're not fully alive. In fact there is only one being who's fully alive. Only God is fully alive. God's glory is bringing us to full life. The saints are those in whom we see this full life most clearly.

Look into the mirror of your soul for a moment. Are you fully alive right now? It could be that you're furious with me for even asking the question. For many of us, life is a patched-together quilt of tight-lipped accommodations, suppressed frustration, half-acknowledged guilt, festering bitterness, and disappointed hopes, and the person we avoid is the one who's able to hold a mirror up to us and make us face the gaping holes in our garment.

There are two kinds of problems. One concerns the limitations of human life – most obviously pain, suffering, and death. The other problem is sin. There's no evidence that the saints manage to avoid limitations like pain, suffering, and death. But somehow, in the lives of the saints, pain, suffering and death become windows into the glory of God, and not occasions for grief and doubt and sorrow. Let's find out how.

Historically the church has had two answers when it comes to the sadness of not being a saint. The first answer is to say, “*It doesn't matter*. You can't ever be fully alive and you can't ever be truly good. But the life

that matters is the resurrection life God gives you and the goodness that matters is the holiness God sees in you by the gift of Jesus' life." This is called justification. Think of what Jesus says to the repentant thief beside him on the cross. "Today you'll be with me in Paradise." There's no evidence the thief became a good person, changed his ways, or lived a full life: all he did was turn to Christ in his last breath and say, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replied, "Today you'll be with me in Paradise." Seems like if we get to heaven, that thief's going to be the first person we see.

Justification has brought joy and life to countless people. It's led myriads of believers to cease feeling miserable over their limitations and sins and trust in God to make something beautiful out of their broken failures. For many parts of the church, it's more or less the whole gospel. In fact, some would object to our celebrating All Saints today because talking about saints distracts from the fact that we're all sinners and there's nothing we can do to deserve the grace of God, which we can only receive and never earn.

But it's not hard to see there's a problem with this as the whole gospel. A friend of mine took his family to visit the Dachau concentration camp in Bavaria. Afterwards, in the car, his son kept pressing him with questions. "Was that a church, Daddy, just outside the walls of the camp?" "Yes, son." "Did the prison guards and commandant go to that church on a Sunday, Daddy?" "Yes, son, I gather they did." "Did they confess their sins and pray to the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ?" "Yes, son, they must have." "Did they walk out of the church and, the next day, go back to the camp and kill hundreds of Jews?" "Yes, son, that's exactly what they did." "Did they still call themselves Christians, Daddy?" "Yes, son, I think they did." ... "How does that work, Daddy?" "I don't know, son. I just don't know."

The way it works is that if conversion and justification are the whole gospel, then the process doesn't require lives to change. And the church in Dachau is simply an extreme example of that.

So there has to be a second answer to the sadness of not being a saint. This second answer says, "You *can* become a saint, albeit gradually. You can go on to perfection. You'll get there, but you must allow the Holy Spirit to form you. And this means adopting disciplined habits of holiness, and allowing these to become your second nature, so that you become shaped into the likeness of Christ." This is called sanctification.

Once I had the privilege to see for myself the wonder of sanctification. I went to visit the Protestant village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, in the hills of southern France. A man named André Trocmé went to be its pastor in the 1930s. After the fall of France in 1940, Jewish refugees started arriving in the village. Trocmé was a pacifist. He believed in hospitality. His parishioners were wily. They'd been shaped over centuries in the arts of cunning resistance to the majority Catholic culture. Together they hid Jews in safe houses, they passed Jews off as laborers, they spirited Jews across the Swiss border. Altogether over five years they saved hundreds of Jews from the death camps. The witness of André Trocmé and his people is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. It's what happens when people see Christ in the stranger and don't avert their gaze, when they truly depend on one another, and when they allow the Holy Spirit to do incredible things through them.

One account like this can make up for a dozen stories of sordid shortcomings and tales of tawdry turncoats. Some Christians really do look redeemed. But there's a problem with sanctification too. Striving to be holy can harden our hearts and make us judgmental and ungracious towards others and even ourselves when sin turns out to lurk at the door after all. Sanctification proclaims that every sinner has a future. But justification recalls that every saint has a past. Don't forget that the disciples had three years with Jesus being shaped in the disciplines of holiness. Yet as soon as the soldiers came to arrest him, they bolted. We never stop being sinners, not till the very day we die.

So should we ask to be left alone in our sadness at not being a saint? Revelation seems not to think so. In Revelation chapter 7 we're given a dazzling picture of the ingathering of the nations. Here is "a great multitude that no one could count." That's good news, to start with. This isn't an exclusive club. There's every invitation for us to be in it. And the people come "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." Well that's pretty big news, too. It turns out there isn't a most favored nation, there isn't a special race – or gender for that matter. There's no one who can't come to the party.

And what are we told about this great multitude? We learn two things. The first thing is that they've come out of the great ordeal. In other words, they've faced the horrors of human life – suffering and pain, and exposure to the cruelty and perversity of the harsh and merciless. And the second thing is that they've washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. In other words, their own sin has been taken away. Together these two things dismantle the trials of human life, which we saw earlier were suffering and sin. It's these trials that inhibit us from being fully alive. So what we're seeing in this picture in Revelation is multitudes of people becoming fully alive.

And what does it mean to become fully alive? It means being *in the presence* of God, being sheltered by God, letting the Lamb be your shepherd, being led by the Lamb to the springs of the water of life, and worshiping God day and night. And it means being *united* with God, never being hungry or thirsty again, and not being subject to the hot sun.

There's a word that describes these wonderful ways of being fully alive. And that word is communion. In the Greek of the New Testament, the word is *koinōnia*, which means fellowship or solidarity. But in the Latin, the word *communio* conveys an even richer range of meaning. Because it combines our greatest desires.

When we love God, we have an overwhelming desire to become one with God, indeed to become God, to be folded into the wonder of full life and true eternal, abiding existence. That's *union*. But we still want to be ourselves, our particular, distinct, idiosyncratic, personal beings, in the presence of God. That's being *with*, or, in Latin, *com*. Union... and com... communion. Communion means *both* being in the presence of God *and* being united with God. Think about it this way. God is Trinity, three persons so with one another that they are united with each other, and yet are still three persons. The Trinity is both union and with. When we're in heaven we're so with God that we are united with God, but are yet still distinct persons. This is communion.

And today together we're practicing this communion in two ways. First, in baptism, five children have just been guided to the springs of the water of life and washed in the blood of the lamb. Their lives will have limitations, and they'll undoubtedly sin; but they're now in the presence of God and part of the body of Christ. Com and union. They're in communion. And then, in a moment, we shall enact together the meal in which we will never hunger or thirst again. We'll be in the presence of God, and, as we eat and drink, we shall be in union with Christ – or, more exactly, the body of Christ will become part of us. Communion again. Baptism and Eucharist are both forms of communion, in which we are united with God and yet remain in the presence of God, retaining our own identity.

And that's not all. Communion is what justification and sanctification were striving for. Justification is all about us being able to stand in the presence of God, like a child being forgiven by a parent in spite of everything. And sanctification is all about us being made holy and being folded into the character of God, like flour being folded into egg and milk and butter. Justification is the com and sanctification is the union. Communion is the everlasting fulfillment of everything justification and sanctification were all about.

So this is what it means to be fully alive. Not to live without limitations, without pain, suffering or death. Not even to live without sin, either our own or other people's, for it always lurks at the door. But to live in communion, united with and yet still fully present to God, united with and yet still fully present to one another. Communion doesn't take away pain and, in this life, it doesn't take away sin. But it embraces you with the only power that's stronger than both of them, and puts them in their place, until every tear is wiped away from every eye.

Live your life united with and fully in the presence of God. Live your baptism. Live a Eucharistic life. Live in communion with God, with one another, and with the created world. That's being fully alive. That's being a saint.

There's only one sadness, the sadness of not being a saint. And there's only one gladness. The gladness of communion. The gladness of the communion of saints.