The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for November 1, 2026
Revelation 7:9-17 - "May We Be Sanctified"

God, give us ears to hear and hearts to listen. Amen.

It's not very often that we get to read from the book of Revelation. So, when it does come around, it seems to me that we should reflect on it.

The Book of Revelation is considered to be apocalyptic literature – heavily symbolic displaying distinctive literary characteristics and claims to unveil the truth about the world as viewed from an apocalyptic perspective. It's a very imaginative book, bursting with colour and sound. The stories are full of divine visions granted to a seer and then interpreted by angels or other spiritual beings. Symbolism is prevalent throughout the Book of Revelation, with the visions involving bizarre creatures and mysterious events.

Some theologians, like Calvin and Luther, wanted nothing to do with Revelation, writing not a word about it. In pop culture, it fuels films ranging from pulp fiction to rock operas. Revelation fuels the human imagination, taking readers beyond themselves, expanding our horizons as it travels from earth to heaven and from present to future. And most of the time, it is very difficult to figure out what the experience means.

You can see maybe why the creators of the common lectionary leave Revelation out of the cycle for the most part. So why is it part of our readings today? On All Saints Sunday?

The custom on All Saints Day is to remember those who have died in the last year. It gives us a moment to grieve those we have lost but also to move to thanksgiving for their life and, even more, for their place now among the saints gathered in the nearer presence of God.

All religions have saints – those who are deceased, and those who are living and walking among us, and if we think as Paul did, perhaps even we ourselves are saints. The word saint is not limited to the "greats" of history, for Paul and other writers in the New Testament use the term synonymously with Christian and, at times, believer. No matter how you define it, the word saint has broad implications, and that is perhaps the best way to describe today's passage from Revelation 7.

In contrast to the first eight verses in this chapter which depict a specific number of worshipers (144,000), Revelation 7:9 casts a larger and more general vision for those who are able to worship around the throne of the Lamb. Beginning with verse 9, the writer describes a great multitude that is countless, numbering those from every tribe, and people, and language. There is no limit to the scope of this multitude, be it geographic, ethnic, numeric, linguistic, economic, and on the list goes.

Also, this multitude is both seen and heard. The multitude is clad in white, it is waving palm branches, and it is crying hymns of praise in a loud voice. Much of this imagery parallels the Triumphal Entry scene as depicted in the gospels, and it can be noted that this multitude pledges itself to the Lamb, which as we know is the image for Jesus. However, unlike the multitude in the Triumphal Entry scene that later turns its back on the Messiah, this multitude will remain faithful to the Lamb "forever and ever." They remain loyal to the Lamb, they wash their robes and made them white, and they worship in the temple.

As a result, they are sheltered, they are fed, and they are protected, and they have found freedom in the One they worship. In this way, the prophecy of Isaiah 25 is fulfilled:

> On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
> a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
> of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
> And he will destroy on this mountain
> the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
> the covering that is spread over all nations;
> he will swallow up death forever.
> Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
> and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
> for the Lord has spoken.
> It will be said on that day,
> "See, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
> This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
> let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

This passage from Revelation reminds us that being a faithful witness – like the great multitude – is the baptismal vocation for us all. It also reminds us that when we live out our Christian vocation, we find freedom in the Lamb of God who sustains us all. Most importantly, this passage reminds us that the vision for sainthood is all encompassing. And it is all-inclusive.

While the death of a loved one is one of the hardest things we will have to endure, let us also remember that loss deserves notice and demands comfort comes from many places, not only death. It comes in leave-takings, as we depart for a new job and home and leave beloved friends, family, and colleagues behind. It comes as you slowly lose a loved one to Alzheimer's. It comes in the loss of employment or dignity. It comes from struggles with illness both of body and mind. It comes from being isolated for months from friends and family for whatever reason. Loss comes at us from so many places.

The passage from Revelation then becomes a letter of encouragement, hope, and comfort to all of us who are struggling with enormous loss over the last year, and not just in loved ones who have died. When struck with grief or loss, there is little capacity to imagine, let alone move toward, a future not dominated by these difficult realities. But Christ promises us that with faith in him, we will be sheltered, fed, and protected. Jesus will indeed wipe every tear from our eyes one day. In the meantime, Jesus sees our struggles and knows our grief. Indeed, he has borne them in his cross and bears them with us even now.

So I ask again, why does Revelation show up, really, only on All Saints Day in our lectionary?

Because this passage is a reminder that sanctity is a gift from God, and that commemorating the Saints in our lives, living and dead, is a way of affirming that the transformative power of Christ is at work all about us in human lives. We are saints because God's sanctity is at work in us.

And so, on this Feast Day of All Saints, we gather to celebrate the lives of those saints who have gone on before us. Let us read the names of those who have passed since the last time we observed this day; and do it with solemnity and dignity and reverence and joy.