

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger William Smith for All Saints Day on the Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost, October 31, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A Sermon for All Saints Day based on Revelation 7:13. "Who are these robed in white and where have they come from?"

One of my greatest pleasures about St. Marks is that it gives me an opportunity to be associated with Scott Shaffer again. He was a warden at St. Helena's when I first came there in 1984, and we've been friends ever since... , not just ordinary friends. We've been acquainted so long that we can be completely honest with one another. When he asked me to be the celebrant this morning, he reminded me that the Celtic liturgy is a little longer than the usual service, and therefore he hoped I'd keep the sermon short. We clergy need friends like that because there are times when we become a little long winded! So this will be a short sermon, and I must confess, an old one.

It's a sermon about **going to heaven**... with apologies to those of you who heard it before.

Let me tell you about the day my father died. It was Palm Sunday. The year was 1960. He was only 58.

My family and I were living in the Virgin Islands, where at the time I was rector of St. John's Church in Christiansted. Late one night I received a phone call from my home in Michigan telling me that my father was at the point of death, and if I wanted to see him before it happened, I had better come at once. I had to fly several thousand miles to reach my father's bedside in time.

I. Except for his aging mother and my 19 year old half sister, I was all the family he had. When we were alone in that hospital room, he said he was glad I made it. He asked me to stay with him. He was afraid to die alone.

My father was not a man of faith. He never went to church, and, as far as I know, he never read the Bible. This saddened me, and at this point, I wanted him to know of my belief that when its time to die we are never alone. When we depart this life we cross over to where we will be with the angels, the archangels, and whole company of heaven. We will be with the friends, family, and all the saints that have gone ahead of us.

But at the time my father was too sick to listen to a sermon about that.

He was hooked up to a great array of bottles, bags, and tubes. I asked the nurse what all of that was for. She explained that they were the life support medications and nutrients prescribed to keep my father alive. Well, said I, since he isn't going to live much longer, and he is miserable, let's ask the doctor to let you cut him loose from all of that.

When the doctor appeared he said he was relieved to receive my suggestion. He couldn't remove these things until some one in the family qualified to do so gave him permission.

You have it, said I. He did so, and my father was gone in less than an hour.

I believe when that happened my father was finally able to see that he was never alone. He was, in fact, with Jesus surrounded by the whole company of heaven.

I am reminded of the negro hymn by Eliza Edmunds Hewitt

"While we walk the pilgrim path-way,
Clouds will over-spread the sky,

But when trav'ling days are over
Not a shadow, not a sigh

When we all get to heaven
What a day of rejoicing it will be!
When we all see Jesus,
We'll sing and shout the victory."

(Hymn 20 in Lift Every Voice & Sing)

II. Alas, so often we must look to our African friends to encounter faith like this. Most of the educated, sophisticated, privileged Caucasians I know regard such belief as quaint, and they have a hard time believing that themselves.

When my father died, my grandmother was devastated. He had been her only child. The loss of him left her feeling abandoned and depressed. She was in pretty good health, so I did give her a little sermon.

"Cheer up, Nana," said I. "We're all going to die someday, and when we do we will join up with the friends and family—all of those saints and loved ones—that have gone before us. You will see my father, your son, again."

Now my grandmother, like her son, was not a person of much faith. As far as I know, the only day she ever went to church was Good Friday. She had a prayer book, but it was an old one that had been out of date for years. As far as I know, she never opened it. I doubt that she prayed very much, if at all. Her response my homily was to say that she didn't believe that she would see my father, my grandfather—her husband, her parents, or any of those she had loved ever again. She probably did believe that there is a heaven, but I suspect she didn't think she would ever get there.

III. Human experience tells me that when people have made up their minds about such things it is nearly impossible to convince them to believe otherwise.

We all react differently to the news of someone's death. We all have differing beliefs about what becomes of us after we die.

Today we are celebrating the feast of All Saints, a day when the Church's liturgy is focused on all of those saints marching into heaven. In the reading taken from the Book of Revelation, we find St. John being taken on a tour of heaven. He tells of seeing a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, all tribes, people and languages standing before the throne of the Lamb. The question is asked, "Who are these robed in white and where have they come from?"

The answer was, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeals..."

They will hunger no more...for the Lamb 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" (Rev. 7:13-17)

In the Gospel for this day (Matthew 5:1-12) we find Jesus on a mountain preaching to a crowd, saying such things as "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Blessed are you when you are reviled and persecuted for my sake, rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

The Scriptures are filled with stories and teachings that promise us the rewards of heaven.

Conclusion: This is the day when we give thanks for this promise. In the collect for All Saints day we ask the Almighty "to give us grace so to follow his blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those in ineffable joys (inexpressable joys...unspeakable joys) that have been prepared for those who truly love God... "

So okay, we're probably pretty weak when it comes to all virtuous and godly living. Maybe truly loving the Lord is a struggle for some of us. Well, the good news is that the grace we pray for is available. It was poured out on all of those saints we are remembering today. For they, like us, were also weak, lacking in virtue and faith. We have examples like St. Paul and St. Augustine, both colossal sinners, and saints like Mother Theresa, beset by doubts. Being called to follow the saints is not a call to perfection.

One of my favorite stories is the one about the headstone in an ancient church yard. There it stands amid all of the other headstones that tell of noble people, loved ones buried beneath them, when they were born and when they died. This headstone says nothing at all about the deceased, except for one word engraved upon it, "Forgiven".

Robed in white, washed in the blood of the Lamb, all of this symbolizes the promise we need most of all to hear, that by the grace of God we are forgiven and therefore called to join those angels, archangels, and all of the company of heaven, singing "Amen!"

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!" (Rev. 7:12) *Amen.*

The following is from *God's Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson, Penguin Books, New York & London, 1927.

GO DOWN DEATH - A FUNERAL SERMON

Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband—weep no more;
Grief-stricken son—weep no more;
Left-lonesome daughter—weep no more;
She's only just gone home.

Day before yesterday morning,
God was looking down from his great, high heaven,
Looking down on all his children,
And his eye fell on Sister Caroline,
Tossing on her bed of pain.
And God's big heart was touched with pity,
With the everlasting pity.

And God sat back on his throne,
And he commanded that tall, bright angel standing at his right hand:
Call me Death!
And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death!—Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.

And Death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street Death galloped,
And the hoofs of his horse struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up Death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,

And she's tired—
She's weary—
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.

And Death didn't say a word,
But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
And out and down he rode,
Through heaven's pearly gates,
Past suns and moons and stars;
On Death rode,
And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky;
On Death rode,
Leaving the lightning's flash behind;
Straight on down he came.

While we were watching round her bed,
She turned her eyes and looked away,
She saw what we couldn't see;
She saw Old Death. She saw Old Death
Coming like a falling star.
But Death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;
He looked to her like a welcome friend.
And she whispered to us: I'm going home,
And she smiled and closed her eyes.

And Death took her up like a baby,
And she lay in his icy arms,
But she didn't feel no chill.
And Death began to ride again—
Up beyond the evening star,
Out beyond the morning star,
Into the glittering light of glory,
On to the Great White Throne.

And there he laid Sister Caroline
On the loving breast of Jesus.

And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
And the angels sang a little song,
And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
And kept a-saying: Take your rest,
Take your rest, take your rest.
Weep not—weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.