

G. K. Chesterton once observed, 'If you want to know the size of the church, you have to count the tombstones' (repeat). Do you have any idea what he may have meant? Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints and one of the truths the church impresses upon us in our celebration is the unity of the church across time and across space. When we talk of church, we are not merely talking about those who are riding a pew with us here at 155 Memorial; nor just about those of us worshipping with our respective faith communities here in Brantford; nor only those who are praising and thanking God in their various time zones around our planet. The church includes all of us, *and* all of those who have gone before us *and* all of those who will come after us. We stand together in one long procession as the saints of God – the body of Christ on earth, the church. If you want to know the size of the church, you need to count the tombstones.

Our emotions may be pretty near the surface, as we recall our own loved ones who have passed into God's nearer presence, and especially those who have died since last All Saints' Day. Please remember that they with us form part of the church. God has simply shifted the membership of our loved ones from the church militant as it is known – that is the church wrestling to live and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ on this side of the veil – to the church triumphant – that is the church now resplendent and glorious in God's nearer presence.

The Revelation to St. John gives us a picture of what life beyond the veil looks like for the saints of God. There we read of countless people, 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' (7.9) Do you get a sense of the expansiveness of this crowd? And all these billions upon billions of people are standing. They are standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb (that's a reference of course to the risen Jesus – he is referred to as the Lamb of God). And they're standing, dressed in white clothes. White of course is a symbol for...? For purity, for having been made clean. And they're holding something as they stand. Every single one of them is not only in white clothing, but is waving a palm branch. Can you see yourselves, your loved ones, as part of this never-ending wave of people, dressed in white, waving palm branches. Palm branches? Well, the Jews used palm branches in their Festival of Booths as a symbol of victory. It is a symbol of victory for the Lamb who has triumphed, and through him, a symbol of victory for all of us, those whom God has reclaimed and restored. And together, they, we are singing at the tops of our voices, for all we are worth,

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!

They, we are praising God and the Lamb, and their hymn and our hymn is being picked up by the angels and elders and four living creatures as they fall on their faces before the throne singing:

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.

It's a joy-filled, radiant, glorious portrayal of our lives in the nearer presence of God, one that has raised the spirits of countless generations of Christians, especially those going through tough times. It reminds us that we are not victorious through our own efforts but only through Jesus' perfect self-offering on the cross and his triumphant rising from the dead. It reminds us of the mind-blowing scope of God's plan of healing and restoration for all of God's children. It reminds us that in God's nearer presence we will continue to participate and to minister in the life of God's reign.

The Feast of All Saints. 'If you want to know the size of the church, you need to count the gravestones.' As we recall and give thanks for the life and witness of those nearest and dearest to us, of those who have played a significant role in our spiritual formation and growth, may we also thank God for the 'communion of saints' – those before us, those with us and those after us. And may the words resonating now in the hearts of our own loved ones, resonate too in ours this morning.

They will hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (7.15-17 *ESV*).

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.