

The Great Multitude – Very Revd Bob Key’s Talk for the Locking Deanery Service of Light

It's a tremendous joy to be speaking to those who live in the north of the county and greetings from those of us who live down south. Thy kingdom Come is the worldwide wave of prayer begun by Archbishop Justin and which this year reached some 172 countries around the world, and it's there with the aim of, as it says: Thy kingdom Come. Praying that people's friends and families, communities and countries would come to know the love of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. It's a great evangelistic wave of prayer that the kingdom of God in the power of the Holy Spirit would come and take root in life after life after life. And the verse that I'm going to preach on just now, well, you'll see it's directly linked to that great aim. Revelation chapter seven verse nine. Let me read it again. 'After this, says John, I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could know from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the lamb, they were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands, and they cried out in a loud voice. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb.'

Now, sometimes Christians can be a bit scared of reading Revelation. I want to say to you that it is like going to an art gallery. You don't have to be an art connoisseur to enjoy the pictures. You don't have to understand the niceties of every brush stroke, the details of every composition, the principles of high lighting and foreground and light and shade to be able to walk in and just say, wow, or I really like that. Or, you know, I've never noticed that about Windsor Castle or whatever. It's a painting of until today. And so in this picture of the glory of heaven, I want to share with you three great things that come to me from this verse and I hope will come to you to the picture of a painting of which we're looking at is a picture of heaven. It's a picture of eternity. And if you were a Christian, if you know and love the Lord Jesus, then you are in the picture because it says there's a great multitude that no one could. And that's the first thought I want to leave with you. This picture is universal. No, I don't mean that everybody is a Christian or anything like that. What I mean is that the *offer* of the Lord Jesus Christ to be part of his kingdom goes out to everybody without any barrier. You don't have to be for a particular racial group or country or background. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor. It doesn't matter about your ethnicity. It doesn't matter about the language you speak or where in the world you live. Quite specifically, everyone is included. This has every nation, every tribe, every people, every language. It's the fruit of the day of Pentecost, isn't it? Even those Galileans who were the world's worst at speaking other languages. A Romanian friend of mine has this lovely story. He says, 'What do you call someone who speaks many languages?' Multilingual. 'What do you call someone who speaks two languages?' Bilingual, 'what do you call someone who speaks one language?' English! Well, just as we have a reputation about not being great at languages, so the Galileans, they had a very, very strong accent and found it difficult to get their tongues around other people's languages. So on the day of Pentecost, when it's largely Galilean fishermen and others who have the gift of languages and can speak the good news of Jesus

so that everyone who was there in Jerusalem could hear it in their own mother tongue, their own dialect, as it were. That's just an amazing miracle, and the fruits of that and the glory of heaven is that the good news has reached the whole world with nobody written off. So when you're praying in the kingdom, come and we encourage everybody to pray for five people to write their names down and tuck it in the Bible or put their initials on the fridge or however you do it. Please don't think just of praying for people that you imagine are likely to come to the Lord Jesus and don't ever think, oh, I'd love to pray for Fred, but, you know, every Sunday he's on the golf course. He's told me he's not interested in God. He doesn't believe he thinks it's all a waste of time. He thinks the church are a bunch of hypocrites. There's no point in my putting his initials on my list. You'll remember St. Paul, that's the man who was in charge of the execution of Steven, the first Christian martyr. Nobody would have thought to put him on there, pray for five list. But God does, and God brings that arch persecutor of the church to become the apostle to the Gentiles because God's plans are always greater, bigger, wider, more far reaching than ours. So here's the first thing. This great multitude is the offer of Jesus open to everyone. And then the second thing about this wonderful crowd of which you and I, if we follow Jesus are part. Is that they're totally clean. Totally clean. That's the point of these white robes, they're wearing white robes now. John's conducted tour of heaven, one of the elders says to have a few verses later these in white robes, where are they? Who are they and where did they come from? And my translation has John replying, 'sir, you know?', what it actually says is, 'you know!', in other words, don't ask me. You're the guide. Who is the one who knows? You tell me who they are and why are they in white robes? And the guides responds, they've come out of the great tribulation, they've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Great tribulation. It may well mean a particular period before the Lord returns, when things are even blacker for Christians, but it also means most certainly that we always live in the world, which is the battleground as it was when Jesus walked and taught. Between the powers of God and the powers of darkness. Satan hasn't given up trying to persecute and snuff out the Church of Jesus Christ, and so we live in great tribulation. Now, there are more Christians dying for their faith now than at any time in history. It's harder to speak of Jesus in many places in the free world as we like to think of it than it has been for centuries, and we are called to live in a world where sometimes we're ridiculed, sometimes we're opposed, and sometimes we're simply expected to keep quiet and have our own private faith, which makes no noise in the public square. Whereas actually, of course, and we see it in our own country where we have tried to throw out so overturn the commands of God and to live according to his precepts in the scriptures, we have a lonelier, sadder, more fragmented, more divorced community than ever before. For best results, as they say, when you get a new washing machine, follow the manufacturer's instructions. And when we throw the manufacturer's instructions out of the window, we shouldn't be surprised that things go wrong. But this multitude out of that tribulation have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. It's all about Jesus and his death.

At the cross of Christ, where as St. Paul says He becomes sin for us, he picks up the tab for the mess of the world. The last word, he cries out from the cross is one word in Greek *Tetaleste* it is finished. It was the word the shopkeepers would write on a little fragment of pottery and give to somebody who purchased a valuable article as proof that they'd paid for it because it means paid in full.

Jesus has paid the price, and therefore when we believe into him, that's John's favourite phrase in his gospel, when we believe in Jesus, when we pick up our lives and trust them to the Lord who hung on the cross for us, then there is a once and for all cleansing. They've washed their robes and the Greek expression means they've done it once, they didn't have to keep on and on and on doing it. But they're clean. And no one can take that cleansing away, my friends. That is such an important thought. All of us as Christians are conscious that we get it wrong, in fact, sometimes those who are trying hard is to work most closely with Jesus are most conscious of the times they screw up. An old hymn puts it like this: And those who feign would serve the best are conscious most of wrong within. And another great line from a hymn, one of my favourites, the hymn writer cries out, 'Take away the love of sinning!'. He's so aware that in his own heart, even the things he knows are wrong, actually things he really still quite wants to do. But we're clean if we're in Jesus, we are clean and all the screw ups we make can't undo that. You'll have gathered by now I love singing and praise and worship and find great comfort in the words of songs and hymns. And when they come to mind. Well, like this one: 'Tis done, the great transaction's done, I am my lord and he is mine!' So please, if you have believed in Jesus, don't let anyone, either your own failures or the devil's whispers in your ear. One of the phrases for the devil is that he's the 'accuser of the brethren'. Don't let him grind you down. Because God's grace is always bigger than his accusations, so send him packing. As scripture says, resist the devil and he'll flee from you. So this great crowd is limitless, this great crowd is clean. And then lastly, this great crowd, well, they are supposed to be this great crowd... are victorious. They're victorious! It says they've got palm branches in their hands and they express that victory in worship. But the palm branches, it was a Jewish symbol from their festivals. You can find it in the Old Testament. And it was also part of Greek and Roman culture. Leaves were used as symbols of victory and the athletic games. And for returning generals, who might have won great battles. They've got the victory. But they didn't win it. This great multitude have been wonderfully faithful under great tribulation. But the victory is not one they've earned. It's one they've been given. The victory belongs to Jesus, and that's why again and again in Revelation, these anthems of praise rang out praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. And then again and again and again. They just can't help bursting out in praise. And all the praise is for God. And the lamb, the picture of the throne of heaven. Yes there is God, God, the father... and there is the lamb. The Lord Jesus Christ described a couple of chapters earlier as the lamb looking as if it had been slain. And then to make the Trinity complete, it speaks of the seven fold spirit of God. The victory in which we share for all eternity, the victory of God's limitless and

unequivocal commitment of love to us in the cross of Christ is entirely his. We can't merit it. We can't deserve it. We can't earn it. We can't buy it. We can't be good enough for it. We can't be religious enough for it. It is all the gift of the grace of God and it lasts forever. So no wonder in the glory of heaven there is constant worship. From the worship of song, to the worship of silence. They never forget, we will never forget. That we are redeemed. Which is a posh way of saying 'paid for'. I love this little story that I first learnt as a child in my church in south London. It was a favourite of the Vicar's then. Well, he's in glory now as part of this great multitude. But I'll tell you the story anyway. There was a boy in a village who loved coming home from school and getting out his penknife and shaping pieces of wood, and very painstakingly he made this boat. His mum made a sail and got a mast, and he took it out onto the village like he pushed it out into the centre of the lake. And on its maiden voyage, it got stuck in the reeds. He went home very sad. A few days later, he was walking down the high street of the village. And there in the shop window was his boat, but it had a price on it. Now, when I was told this story, the price was two and six and I realise, oh no, of you won't have a clue what that means. So let's say it was five pounds. He thought, but it's mine. But he went home. He saved his money. He went back to the shop, he paid the shopkeeper the five pounds, and he came up with the boat, he looked down on it and said. 'Little boat, you are twice mine. I made you. And now I've paid for you.' And when God looks at you and me, because although this is a great multitude that no one can no, it's made up of individuals and Jesus knows the number of hairs on our head. He looks at each one of us in love and says, you are twice mine. I made you. And I've paid for you. So here is this wonderful, buyable picture of heaven. It's open to everyone. It's full of people who've been utterly cleansed. And it's a place of victory. Jesus's victory. Shared with us. The amazing thing, isn't it, that Jesus looked at disciples who was? Run away from him, who would let him down just like you and me and says. I don't call you servants. I called your friends. That's the closeness of heaven, so why wouldn't we want our friends, our family, our communities, our countries to be there to? So pray thy kingdom come, it's from Ascension Day to Pentecost, because that's what the early church did. You can read about it in Chapter one, but pray for those people that they'll come to be part of the painting. If you ever go to Amsterdam, go to the Rijksmuseum, and there you'll find in a gallery a specially made. Rembrandt's painting of the Nightwatch, it was really a painting of the Home Guard, and in the painting you can see the light falls beautifully on the officer. I always think of him as Captain Mainwaring and there's a Sergeant Wilson figure standing next to him. And then there are others are hidden around the place. And you see, the Nightwatch was a subscription painting, it was paid for by the people who were in it, and the more you paid, the better your position. So the equivalent of Captain Mainwaring paid a lot more than some of the others. But in the glory of heaven, it's what he paid. That owns our place in the picture. And you know, when God has painted you into his picture. Nothing. No amount of devilish white spirit. Kind of a rub you out. God, keep us looking forward, God keep us praising for all he's done. And God motivate our pray. For our friends and family. To come to Christ. Amen