

Who do you see? The Holy Gospel for today, as the Gospel always does, shows us the Lord. Jesus beholds His people, He sits down, and He speaks to them. Who do you see? You see Jesus. That is who the apostle John sees. In Revelation chapter 5 the apostle beholds the heavenly throne room and he sees the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the fierce defender of His people. He sees the Root of David, the king who reigns over His people with no end to His dominion. Who does John see? He sees the Lamb, standing as though it had been slain. It is Jesus, who is praised by the heavenly host: **“You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”** (Rev 5:9).

We behold the Lord Jesus, the crucified one, who even in heaven is identified by and praised for His death. The risen Lord before His ascension appears to the disciples, and He shows them His hands, still marked with the holes from the nails, and He says to them, **“Peace be with you.”** It is those wounds which bestow peace. They are held up for the disciples to see. It is by those wounds, it is by His blood, that He ransomed us, bought back from sin, death, and the devil, a people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation. By His death, the shedding of His blood, He has made people for God, people belonging to God, holy ones, saints. We are sprinkled clean not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with the blood of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

When we gather here we hear Jesus. We see Jesus. He still holds His wounded hands out for you to see. We sing in one of our communion hymns:

*To pastures green, Lord, safely guide,
To restful waters lead me;
Your table well for me provide,
Your wounded hand now feed me.*

What we pray for in Psalm 23 is answered for us in this life chiefly in the Holy Communion. The Lord who is praised by the heavenly host for His death for sinners, who lives in resurrected glory and who reigns to all eternity, He is seen and heard among His people on this earth. More than that. He comes here to give you His true body and blood, the very things which accomplished your ransom from sin, death, and hell.

But neither He in heaven, nor we on earth, are alone. Even as we pray the words **“The Lord is my Shepherd,”** so also we recognize that we are joined to one another: **“we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.”** Christians do not live in isolation. We are all members of a flock. We are all members of the one body under Christ our Head.

So who do you see? Likely today, like very few other days, you see them. The Scripture readings appointed for today, especially the last two, might have been read at their funeral. But it's almost always the hymns that do it. You see their faces as you sing. Perhaps you cast a glance over to the pew where they used to sit. You almost certainly see them when their name is read, or in the moment of silence when you name them in your heart and mind. Who do you see?

Not dead people! Oh no. Granted, they are gone, but they are not dead. John makes that clear from what he sees: **“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”** No, they are not dead! They stand before the Lord. They see Him too. They cry out, they sing. The dead do not do that.

Today, as we stand before our Lord who comes to be in midst of His cleansed, blood-bought saints, we turn our heads a little to each side. We consider who is in our peripheral vision. We see who stands alongside us. Even as the author to the Hebrews exhorts us to fix our eyes on **“Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith”** (Heb 12:2), he first reminds us that **“we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”** (12:1). Who are these witnesses? **“These are**

the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall 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.” They have come out of the great tribulation, the vale of tears, this life with all its pain, sorrows, and temptations. And they are before the throne of God. They are sheltered by their shepherd. No, they are not dead, they are with the Lord.

And their Lord and ours is the same Lord. There is one church, one body. *We feebly struggle, they in glory shine, yet all are one in Christ*, for all are His. They have gone to His nearer presence, removed from our visible sight, but they are not removed from us. Today we celebrate, we rejoice in that blest communion, that divine fellowship, which is a union that not even death can put asunder.

Today, with renewed vigor, with comfort, hope, and even joy in midst of lingering sorrow, we give thanks to God for them, how He blessed us through them, that He preserved them in His Word and faith and has now given rest to His faithful warriors. And we long for the day that we, together with them, will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. It is the day which we pray for in the holy liturgy: the day of His coming, where with all the saints, all of Christ’s holy ones, all those who belong to Him, we will celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end.

In the meantime we join with them, encouraged by their faith and strengthened by their fellowship. Here especially, we on earth practice for eternity as we sing with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven that hymn of praise to the Lord whom they and we behold together: