

The great crowd

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[0 : 0 0] Lewis, thank you. I want to talk this morning about our future. What lies ahead of us! Not next week, not next year. I would like us to look forward further. Through two years of a pandemic, it's been very hard to lift your eyes and look beyond. Do you not think? Am I going to be in isolation next week? Am I going to see my family at Christmas? Can I plan for the next school half term? I can't.

So hard to lift your eyes to some kind of certain future. If you're in an Eastern European city in the cellar and you hear them coming, so hard to lift your eyes and imagine that there would be a certain future that you can cling on to. What I would like us to do this morning is to lift our eyes from this world and our present situation and look forward to our end point to where we as a church and to where our world is heading. We've just read from Revelation chapter 7. Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is written by the Apostle John to first century churches. He's writing to Christians facing hard and uncertain times in a hostile world. Christians wondering what will our future hold? And in this part of his letter John records a series of God-given visions. The living God opens John's eyes and shows him reality, deep true visions of heaven, colourful true visions of history, revelation from God to show churches then and now who's in charge and where our world is heading. Revelation from God to strengthen and to shape people like us then and now that we might keep going together, confident in him and living for him for five years and ten years and twenty years and on. In our verses that Lewis read to us, verses nine to 17, John is given a particular vision of the future through and beyond life and history now with its diseases and wars and ups and downs through even the day of resurrection and final judgment. This vision here reveals what's beyond the heavenly destination of all who place their faith in Jesus Christ, the goal of history where all of God's purposes for creation are going. For us as a small church family in the north end of Cambridge, this is our ultimate future. It is what lies ahead for us.

It is what we will be a part of and this vision is magnificent and should fire us and keep us holding on to the one who will hold us fast. Let me read verses nine and ten.

After this I looked. What did you see, John? And there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were 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.

Right at the centre of this heavenly vision is a throne. We're in the presence here of the throne room of God, the eternal and almighty God, the creator of all things, the king of all creation, seated and enthroned in glorious majesty. Standing at the centre of the throne, alongside him and with him, is the Lamb, his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. But actually the thing that catches John's eyes at this point is not so much the throne, it's not so much God, rather it's the people standing before it. Verse nine, I looked and there before me was a great multitude, a multitude, a crowd of people, people like us, living, breathing adults and children standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

[4 : 3 0] Who are these people? Who are they? And verses nine and ten and on pictures this crowd, who they are, where they're from, what they wear, what they say and what they do. Notice three things about the crowd this morning. Firstly, this is a worldwide crowd. Verse nine, there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language. Some of us like being in big groups, some of us like being by ourselves. I wonder what the biggest crowd is you've ever been in.

60,000 maybe in a stadium. I don't know, it feels big that. I did some internet research. I came across the 10 largest gatherings in human history. Number 10, an anti-war march in Rome in 2003 saw 3 million people marching together. That's a lot of people together for one event. Nothing compared to number one.

In February 2013 in Uttar Pradesh in India, the Kummela pilgrimage took place and a group of Hindu pilgrims gathered on the banks of the Ganges. How many? An estimated 30 million gathered. One event, one crowd.

It's kind of mind-blowing, crowds like that. You can't imagine it. This crowd here beats them all. A great multitude that no one could count. Uncountable.

So from the throne at the centre, spreading out as far as you can see and beyond. The size of this crowd around the throne should not be surprising.

[6 : 21] In Genesis, which we've been reading lately, God made promises to Abraham, promised to bless him and be his God and to bless the world through him. There's verses on the handout. In Genesis 15, the Lord took Abraham outside and said, look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be. In Genesis 22, again to Abraham, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. And through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed. Ever counted the stars? Ever been to the beach and taken a handful of sand in your hand and tried to count it? You can't do it. Here then, at the end of history, God's promises to Abraham fulfilled. Before the throne of God, children of Abraham, people who placed their faith in Jesus

Christ and belong to him, as many as there are grains of sand on the seashore. And this crowd, truly worldwide. In the reading from Genesis 17, the Lord says to Abraham, your name will be Abraham, for I've made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful. And here in this verse, this people, they come from every nation, tribe, people and language. There will be no racial or cultural barriers.

A real united nations, this crowd. English and French and Irish, Hauser, Yoruba and Igbo, Hutu and Tutsi, Brazilian, Peruvian, Ukrainian, Russian, every nation of people united together before the throne. It's a worldwide crowd that is our future. That's what lies ahead of us.

Maybe this is just me because I'm the vicar, but I wonder whether you ever look around St John's Orchard Park and sort of weigh up who's here, do a head count and try and think of the people. Maybe one Sunday you count 45. Maybe you count 55 another week. Maybe 45 the next we go up and down. Maybe you notice different nationalities. There's South African and Zimbabwean and Hungarian and people from Hong Kong and all over the place. It's so wonderful as a church to grow to be a slightly more mixed congregation. It's so good to stand next to or two metres away from a brother or sister from a different nation united together and singing to our God. But there is so much more to come.

On that day before the throne, a worldwide crowd. Second, as John looks out, he sees a washed crowd.

[9 : 32] Notice what they're wearing. Verse 9 still. There before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. What's with the white robes? It's not a fashion mistake.

In Revelation, in the Bible, the colour white speaks in part of being clean and pure. Clean and pure before God.

And verses 13 and 14 expand a bit. Verse 13, do you see? Then one of the elders asked me, these in white robes, who are they and where did they come from? I answered, sir, you know. And he said, these are they who've come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Somehow you're washed and white and clean.

When back in history, the people of Israel were about to meet God on Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19, God commanded Moses, quote, go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow.

Make them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Because to be in the presence of a pure and holy God, you must have no dirt on you, no moral dirt in you.

[11 : 08] At the end of the World Cup final at Wembley in 1966, Bobby Moore, England captain, is muddy and exhausted. And as he stands on the Wembley turf about to lead the team up the steps to receive the trophy, he sees her Royal Highness the Queen waiting to present the trophy to her pristine white gloves.

And Bobby Moore looks down at himself caked in dirt and sweat. And as he climbs the steps, if you watch the footage, you see him frantically rubbing his hands and desperate to make himself clean

and ready for royalty. That's what the Bible's talking about. To stand safely before the throne of Almighty God, you've got to be washed and pure, not just on the outside, but deep inside yourself, with a clean and clear conscience.

But the truth is our world and we, ourselves, we are so far from that. And we know that. The greed and violence and anger that you look at on your smartphone and know in the world around us is not just out there, it is in here. Flowing from our hearts, Jesus says. Not clean and pure water and living, but a kind of sewage water slewing out of us. Greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, says Jesus and so on. Shameful things. Thoughts and deeds we'd rather not talk about which stick to us and cake us and make us dirty and contaminated before him. We know what that feels like. All of us have become like one who is unclean, says Isaiah 64, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. How is it possible for people like us? How is it possible for anyone in Orchard Park? To stand before him, this God whose eyes are too pure to look on evil. So terribly sad that the 30 million pilgrims who gathered in Uttar Pradesh in 2013 were actually there to try to wash away a lifetime of sins. That's why they gather. By piling into the Ganges River.

[13:29] Make us pure. But washing in a river won't do anything for you. Nor any other kind of religious observance or anything like that.

It's like trying to deal with heart disease by taking a bath and then putting a plaster on your chest. It won't work. How do you get clean?

A white robe. Verse 14. This worldwide crowd, these people wonderfully, have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.

The lamb here in Revelation is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He's called the Lamb. He's called the Lamb because he's the one who was led like a lamb to the slaughter and was slain.

He's the one who was led like a lamb. He's the one who came into our world and sacrificed himself. Suffering a violent death on the cross, his blood poured out as he bleeds and dies on the cross.

[14:34] We have sung of this already this morning. This lamb takes away and bears upon himself all the dirt and sin and defilement of this great crowd of people.

The real life effects of his bloody death today for us. That our sins can be washed away and our guilt removed and our conscience cleansed and our shame covered.

You place your faith in Jesus Christ and you wash your robe and make it white in the blood of the lamb. Through his cleansing death so that now today you are able to stand clean and pure before your God.

That is the heart of the gospel. That's what we and our world so desperately need. A salvation that cleanses us. As you turn to Jesus Christ, I have sinned.

Forgive me and cleanse me. And he will. Makes us a church family of... Makes us a group of people who aren't superior to others.

[15:50] Looking down on the dirty world out there and tutting at the great unwashed. No, to the world around us, to people in desperate need. We're a bunch of people who've been washed clean by his grace.

And what we've experienced, you can too. Second thing about this crowd, they're washed. They're clean before God now, for sure.

And can you start to imagine this? On this day in the future, here, when we've made it through and we've been raised from the dead, we will actually stand before his throne and we will see his face. And we won't need to hide. And we won't even feel the faintest glimmer of shame because we'll be utterly, utterly pure before our maker.

You, me, in this worldwide crowd. That's our future. That's what lies ahead of us. A crowd before the throne worldwide washed.

[16:54] Thirdly, in this verse, a worshipping crowd. This great multitude then from every nation before the throne. End of verse 9. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

That's victory and celebration, those branches. We're washed. We've made it through. And so, verse 10, they cry out in a loud voice. Not half-hearted, mumbling singing.

We don't do that as a church. We sing loudly, which is wonderful. They, too, cry out in one loud voice together. And they sing and we will sing, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Salvation belongs to him. We'll only truly start to sing, and we will sing on that day, with joy when we realise in our bones that salvation from start to finish belongs to him.

His grace and love towards us. His power in us. His Son, the Lamb of God who dies for us. His Spirit sent to live in us.

[18 : 02] We don't work hand in hand with him to haul ourselves to heaven. It's not what goes on here week by week. Salvation belongs to our God, we'll shout, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Can you imagine that day? I love a Sunday here. I think we make quite a noise at St John's when we sing. I was so moved this week seeing the pictures of Ukrainian Christians in a subway in Kiev, I think, singing.

You gave your life for us, Lord. Our names are written in the Book of Life, they sang, echoing round this subway underneath the streets of Kiev.

Can you imagine on that day, not just us, but us joining with them and us and them and millions upon millions around the world, in this worldwide crowd, joining together with one voice as we gaze on him.

In fact, it won't just be us singing. Verse 11, all the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, Amen, praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever.

[19 : 22] Amen. They will sing. Jesus once said there's rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Imagine how they're going to sing as they look out over the great uncountable multitude of us.

Just talking this morning about our future. What lies ahead of us. Not in the next week or the month or the next year, but beyond.

Do you want? Do you want to be a part of it? If you have not yet turned to the Lord Jesus Christ, you must. Bring to him your sins and your dirt and your life and say, Jesus, I turn to you.

I come to you. I trust in you. Wash me clean. Save me. That I might be a part of that crowd on that day. And to every single person who has turned to Jesus and put their faith in him, to churches of people around the world, these verses in Revelation are here to say to us, raise your eyes and keep going.

Because this is your future. This is what lies ahead of us. This is where history's heading. This is what counts.

[20 : 45] Whatever you're going through in your life, wherever you live around the world, hold on. And know that right now today, God is working towards that great day.

Today as a church, here in Orchard Park, we have a gracious God in control of history, who keeps his promises. We have the son of God, the lamb who's washed us clean, our older brother.

We have his powerful spirit within us. We're a united church family of brothers and sisters together from different nations and backgrounds. And there's a community here and a Cambridge and a world beyond who desperately need to hear of the cleansing work of the lamb.

Raise our eyes together at the start of March and keep going together. Living for him. Listening to his word and doing what he says. Forgiving and loving one another.

Relying on his power. Reaching out with the good news of Jesus Christ, the lamb of God. Keep going. Keep holding on to your Lord and Saviour. Because can you imagine how it will be on that day?

[21 : 59] Can you imagine how it will be the day when it's no longer vision written here, but your actual experience? You rise and stand.

And you look around you. And maybe right close to you, members of St. John's. Tom and Emily and Elvis.

Standing clean and tall. Gazing on their God. And we say to one another, we've made it. And next to them, next to you, a person from Orchard Park, you never imagined you'd see.

A colleague who you spoke to about Jesus once or twice, and she's there. She turned to Christ, and now she's standing, washed in the blood before the throne. And as you smile, as you see people, you recognise, you sense within yourself a deep purity, like nothing you felt before.

And you turn your head and raise your eyes, and as far as you can see, stretching into the distance, men and women and boys and girls of every tribe and language, stretching away, cleansed and

victorious.

[23 : 07] And together with us and with them, you turn and we gaze together on our God and on the Lamb. And in that moment, maybe only then, we grasp the stunning glory of what he has done.

And we open our mouths and we sing at the top of our voices. That's our certain future. It's not words, it's not a dream, it's not, come on, let's keep going, this will happen.

Together. Together now. This week, will we live and pray and work with all the energy he gives us towards that day?

Will we hold on? I'm going to read verses 15 to 17, Revelation 7, how it will be for us.

And then I'm going to lead us in prayer. Speaking of those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

[24 : 14] 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.

Never again will they hunger. Never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd.

He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Almighty Father, we bow before you this morning in humble thanks and praise.

You are the Lord of history. Your son has died to wash us clean. And you do not lie. You will keep your promises.

And we who've put our faith in your son, we will make it through. We and our brothers and sisters around the world.

[25 : 25] We will take our place in this crowd. And we will stand pure together and look on our saviour who died for us.

And we will sing your praise for all eternity. Please help us. Help us this week to persevere in our faith.

Help us to live for you and please you and pray to you. And we pray and trust that you will hold us and all your people fast until the day when your son comes again and we rise with him in glory.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.