

## **Upstairs/Downstairs** (From the All Saints' Day Epistle & Gospel)

**Revelation 7:2** *And I saw another angel ascending from the east , having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, 3 Saying , Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. 4 And I heard the number of them which were sealed : and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel ...*

**9** *After this I beheld , and, lo , a great multitude, which no man could number , of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; 10 And cried with a loud voice, saying , Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. 11 And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, 12 Saying , Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.*

**13** *And one of the elders answered , saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they ? 14 And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest . And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. 17 For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.*

**St. Matthew 5:1** *[Jesus] seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set , his disciples came unto him: 2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying , 3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are they that mourn : for they shall be comforted . 5 Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled . 7 Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy . 8 Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. 10 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are ye , when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely , for my sake . 12 Rejoice , and be exceeding glad : for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.*

What do such apparently very different texts have to do with each other? The Epistle presents us with a vision of unparalleled joy, worship, and praise. The involvement of glorified believers in this heavenly scene is clear. These are the saints who have gone before us, one part of that blessed company which occupies our thoughts on All Saints' Day. Let's call this description "Upstairs". But what of the St. Matthew reading? How does it figure into the theme of "All Saints"? Jesus is teaching us in very plain terms what the rule of sainthood is on earth, or "Downstairs". Here dwells the other portion of those we call "saints", and also honor on this very important Church day. God willing, we will find ourselves among them. Today's sermon will discuss the absolute connection that exists between "Upstairs" and "Downstairs".

We tend to think of "saints" as those who have preceded us into eternity, having

*fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith* (2 Tim. 4:7) to quote St. Paul's words penned just before his martyrdom. But that group called "saints" indeed includes every living believer, as well. The English word "saint" translates a Greek word meaning "holy, pure, reverend, worthy of veneration". It is a word that the great Apostle --many, many times in his writings-- applied to *all* true believers of his day. It is no less applicable to the faithful of our time or any time. It is a place of honor and sanctity that is granted those who have been, through the blood of Christ, made holy and brought into intimate relationship with God. It is the highest calling available to any human being anywhere.

But such *saints* are still Downstairs, here on earth, and their eventual promotion to Upstairs, to Glory, is vitally connected to the degree of their acceptance of the conditions of sainthood that our Lord so graphically outlines in today's Gospel. The evidence of our sainthood --of our being among that blessed company of the redeemed-- will be our conformity to those conditions. Do you find them in your experience? Do I, in mine? It is here where the stark difference between Upstairs and Downstairs becomes so obvious.

The saints Jesus describes are in poor in spirit. They are in mourning. They are meek, and they are afflicted with hunger and thirst. In a broken, dark, and thankless world they are called to be merciful, to be pure of heart, and to be peacemakers. Finally, they are persecuted, reviled, and accused of all manner of evil. The only joy they experience on earth will in part be the consequence of having endured these very negative experiences. What sort of "sainthood" is this?

This is the great paradox of the Christian life. We are indeed promised great rewards, far past the telling, of which the account in Revelation speaks of in human terms which fall far, far short of reality in their attempt to describe the indescribable. But our participation in these glories can never be like the winning of some vacation sweepstakes, as if acquired by good luck. Nor can they ever be regarded as something deserved, in the sense that people often look forward to retirement, for even the holiest saint could never present in hand a life that could be offered to buy himself into the presence of God. The price for Glory was fully paid by our Lord on the Cross. But the privilege of sainthood nevertheless presents us with requirements, with rules. It is impossible to access Upstairs without having first gone through Downstairs. Let's look more closely at this "first story" where we now dwell, and where the departed saints once lived.

It is very dark here. Sin has influenced absolutely every corner of the "house", the world. I see a flickering lamp off in the shadows. Its light seems constantly threatened by the ever increasing winds of evil that beat against the four walls. This is the Church. Its members grieve over the wickedness that rules the world. They fight constantly against its power that rises even in their own breasts. They are indeed *poor of spirit*. They derive no joy from the world's pleasures which are constantly thrown in their faces, though they are sore tempted. The burden of the

broken world rests upon their shoulders like an almost unbearable weight, and they *mourn*. Their Master, their Lord, does not permit them to retaliate against the evil that besets them by means of that same evil. No, He commands them to *meekness* in the face of their enemies. This world to them is a spiritual desert, in which there seems to be so little evidence of the triumph of good over evil. Injustice is everywhere, and iniquity occupies the highest positions in the land, and so they *hunger and thirst after righteousness*. Under such stresses, in this awful place so devoid of virtue, they alone are called to show an abundance of *mercy* and to be *makers of peace*, even among their enemies. And their Lord commands them, in the midst of such chaos, to keep their focus firmly upon Him, to be *pure in heart*. One would think that such a display of Christian grace would win them favor and reward, even here, but it brings them *persecution* and abuse instead. This is Downstairs. The *saints* live here. And this is how they should live. If they persevere, and cling to the promises of Christ under such conditions, they will indeed be *blessed*. They will be *comforted*, and will *inherit the earth*. Their appetite for more of God will be *filled*, and, once their sojourn below is completed, they will receive eternal *mercy*. They will be rewarded with the vision of God in the *kingdom of heaven*.

It's time to move Upstairs to view the condition of the blessed saints there who have realized these promises to the uttermost. They are *before the throne* of God and *before the Lamb* in a transport of worship. They have at last realized all that they had hoped for, patiently awaited, and quietly labored for. They are able to look back upon their lives Downstairs from the perspective of Glory which has utterly transformed their past experience into something wondrously different from what it had been for them when they had dwelt within it. They *hunger no more, neither thirst any more*, and the tears they had wept in that place *God Himself wipes away*. Best of all, the One whom they had served in faith, to Whom they had clung desperately in the midst of their sojourn below, now *dwells among them*. And the Lamb, who died to bring them there, Himself *feeds them and leads them unto living fountains of water*.

As we conclude, it is vital that we remember that Jesus never required anything of us that He did not model Himself. There is not one single quality of sainthood listed in this blessed passage that He Himself did not live out to the fullest. He was here, Downstairs, and He is only calling us to the same life that He lived in response to the selfsame conditions to which we, His people, His saints, are now subject. Best of all, He has given us the power to do so (Romans 15:13, Eph. 1:19), and has promised us His presence forever (Matt. 28:20).

One can never get Upstairs without first traversing Downstairs. And though the conditions are profoundly difficult, and unlikely to show any improvement, they will produce for us a consequence which will justify every moment we lived patiently and in faith among them.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*