

We are continuing our sermon series, Scripture Illuminated, and today we're using the Ghent Altarpiece to illustrate Revelation 7:2–17, the appointed text for All Saints Day. This altarpiece was created for St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent Belgium in 1432. This massive work of art consists of twelve panels that can fold or unfold. When the altarpiece is folded shut, it also displays a series of art on the backside. When it is fully unfolded, it is eleven feet tall and fifteen feet wide.

The history of this masterpiece is a sermon unto itself with it being relocated, stolen, damaged, and restored at various times in its history, but today, we're going to focus on one panel of this work of art, the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. This painting taught the faithful gathered at St. Bavo's Cathedral as well as us, that TODAY WE JOIN THE GREAT MULTITUDE AT THE LAMB'S TABLE.

What jumps out to us immediately from looking at this painting, is the great crowds streaming in from the four corners of the earth. I. A great multitude gathers at the Lamb's table. **“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!””**

On All Saints Day, we celebrate all the believers in Christ. In the bottom left-hand corner, we see the saints from the Old Testament era. Many of them have Bibles open to see that the Lamb before their eyes is the one testified of old. The Lord is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in Heaven we will see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob there as well. In this corner we also see people of all ethnicities and races. Heaven will be filled with people from every corner of the globe.

To the right we see the twelve apostles and other recognizable figures from the New Testament era. Yet there are still others unrecognizable to us. Perhaps the artist painted the faces of friends and contemporaries, but if he did, those names and identities are lost to time.

In the background we see countless and nameless men streaming in from the left and women streaming in from the right. These men and women are holding palm branches in their hands as our text from Revelation declares. In fact, as you zoom out, the saints are spilling off the canvas, the Knights of Christ stream in from the left and other holy figures stream in from the right.

This painting gives us a picture of the grandeur and vastness of this “...**great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**” On this day we can celebrate because in that vast crowd, our family, our friends, our beloved are part of the festal gathering. Those who have died in the faith are the saints we celebrate on this All Saints Day.

For your beloved who has departed in the faith, this promise holds true: II. The Lamb feeds this great multitude with His forgiveness. We read this in Revelation: **“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.”**

In this painting we have three illustrations of this reality. First, we see the Holy Spirit sheltering them with His presence and shining over them. We recall the words of Revelation 21:23 **“And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”**

Second, we see the fountain of life. On it is inscribed Revelation 22:1 **“This is the fountain of the water of life, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.”** From this the saints drink, this is the spring of living water to which the saints unnumbered flock.

Third, we see the Lamb in the center from which its blood flows into a chalice. With the Spirit, the Lamb, and the Fountain all in alignment, we recall the words from John **“For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.”**

The Lamb is at the center, and that's the focal point, Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God. On the altar is inscribed **“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”** Also we see Jesus the way, the truth, the life on the banners to the left and to the right. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who is the shepherd in the midst of the throne around which the saints throughout time and history gather.

Behind the Lamb are the instruments of His suffering and death. Two angels to the left hold the cross from which he hung, the crown of thorns and the spear that pierced him. The angels to the right are holding the sponge with the gall, the whip, and the whipping post at which Jesus was scourged.

But those things are behind Jesus. We are reminded of the author of Hebrews who writes that Jesus, **“who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”**

For all the Saints Jesus endured the cross. He endured the crown of thorns. He endured the spear that pierced His side. He suffered the lashings and the scorn for all the saints. And He endured it for you. He endured it that you would be forgiven. He endured it that you would be clothed in white robes. He endured it that you would never be separated from your loved ones, and join this marriage feast of the Lamb in His Kingdom which has no end.

From His side flows blood, and in this blood there is forgiveness of sins. This forgiveness is applied to us as we partake of the Lamb's body and blood in the bread and wine of communion. III. We gather at the Lamb's table.

Art is a window into another world. Certainly, it takes us to faraway places that were captured by the artist's brush. But we need to understand that this piece of art is something more than simply a beautiful museum piece. It was set in front of the altar at a Christian church.

The Ghent Altarpiece is a window of what is going on in Heaven as we gather as the Saints of the Lord around the body and blood. Before Communion, I will pray this prayer:

“In the communion of all Your saints gathered into the one body of Your Son, You have surrounded us with so great a cloud of witnesses that we, encouraged by their faith and strengthened by their fellowship, may run with perseverance the race that is set before us and, together with them, receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You”

What's the brass tacks here? Why wax eloquent about art interpretation and masterpieces painted centuries ago? Every communion Sunday is an All Saints Day wherein we partake of the Lamb in His Kingdom which has no end alongside those who have departed in the faith.

This side of heaven, the closest you'll ever be to your loved one who has departed in the faith is at this altar and ones like it where for but a moment, heaven meets earth, and you too join in the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. **“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,”** Join us today. Join us often at the feast. Come to Mount Zion to have your sins taken away. Come to the Throne Room of the Lamb who shelters us with His presence and wipes every tear from our eyes.

Come to the font where you were washed in the waters of the fountain of life. Come to the altar and peer beyond the altar rail to the mirror image of the altar rail that is in the heavenly realms. In this meal join Frances, Lenore, Nadine, Jeneane and Don, Lois and Don, Harold, Wayne, and Shirley—all kneeling on the other side of the rail. Join grandma and grandpa, and those in your own life who have gone before you. Join in this *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* and raise your voices with those with palm branches in their hands crying out **“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”** Amen!