

"After this I looked 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 in front of 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." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" 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 have come 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 spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center 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"

On Tuesday crowds of happy, partying, dressed up people in large and smaller groups will gather all over the country and all eyes will be glued on, of all things, a horse race - the Melbourne Cup. Joining them will be hundreds of millions of people from all around the world via satellite. We call it "the race that stops the nation". At the end of the race the focus will be on the winner's enclosure and the horse and jockey that won the day. The day will end in tears for some and joy for others. They either backed the winner or they wasted their hard earned money on a dud.

Meanwhile over in America on Tuesday the whole nation will turn out and all eyes will be on a two-horse race for the Presidency of the United States. The stakes are a little higher both for them and for the whole world. They will cast their vote for their future and ours! They will put their trust in and back one of the candidates to look after them. It too will be a day that ends in tears for some and joy for others and it will be a day that somehow will affect the course of world history.

In today's word of God from Revelation we see another crowd of happy, celebrating, dressed up people. It is a vision of a gathering of people that is already happening now and which will go on forever. It is a gathering not on earth but in heaven. There we see a crowd celebrating, an enormous crowd of people from all over the world and all the different denominations of the Christian church! Too many people to count. The crowd is cheering and waving and celebrating and excited. They have something in their hands – not a form guide or a how to vote card but palm branches, a symbol of peace and victory. All eyes are focused, not on a horse, not on a new president, but on a lamb! That's right, on a lamb - Jesus the "Lamb of God" who took away the world's sin when he died for it on the cross and who is now the centre of attention in heaven.

The people who are there have backed the surprising winner, the one who was put down on the cross but whom God raised up to forgive and save us all. These people in this heavenly gathering have lived and died by faith in the Lamb of God and sometimes suffered for their faith in him. They have gone through hard times and death maybe even because of their faith in the Lamb, in Jesus, but they have come through it, backing him all the way to save them. The one who saw this vision and wrote it down for us, John himself was imprisoned for Christ but was given this glimpse into heaven to encourage him and us to persevere in our faith. All these Christians who may have suffered and even died for their faith have come out of their tribulation and suffering and are now celebrating. They worship, celebrating and enjoying God and his victorious Lamb - Jesus together with the angels and all the other heavenly creatures. They celebrate the victory of the Lamb over sin and evil, over death, and because they have entered their salvation in the fullest sense of the word. **"Salvation belongs**

to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" they sing. And the angels and all the creatures of heaven respond: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

As we look at the faces in this heavenly crowd we recognize some of them, we see people from St Pauls who have died in the last year too and some of our family and friends. As we look into their faces we see that there are no tears there, no disappointments or regrets, only joy. Everyone in this scene has backed the winner - the Lamb. Noone will need to take a "sickie" next morning because there is no sickness there, and noone dies any more because where the Lamb is, death is a thing of the past. Noone gets sunburnt or dehydrated or hungry in heaven, for everyone is treated like a VIP by God himself. **"He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center 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."** That's what salvation means in its fullest sense, a life with God and eachother restored and made new in every way. Life as God wants it to be for us.

Like the crowd on Tuesday this crowd are all dressed up, but they are all wearing white, they are covered with the white robe of holiness and Christ's righteousness, their clothes have been washed in the blood the Lamb shed for them on the cross on Good Friday. These are the robes of our baptism, the robes of our sainthood. These people in heaven are "all saints" not because their lives or their faith was any better than ours but because they are wearing the robes washed by the blood of Christ. Normally blood stains but Christ's blood cleanses us, and we experience that holy cleansing again this morning as we take and drink that blood in the wine of Holy Communion. Here we already become a part of that heavenly scene too anticipating our arrival there one day, and already in a sense we too here today, and smaller and larger groups of Christians all over the world from every tribe and nation are standing alongside that crowd of cheering saints. And together with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we praise the name of our God and the Lamb.

The Melbourne Cup may stop the nation for a few hours every year but it comes and goes and soon we can't even remember last years winner. The Lamb of God stops our lives daily and weekly as we come together to gather around him. Worship of the Lamb goes on constantly around the world, and constantly in heaven. One day the world will stop altogether but worship of the Lamb will go on forever, the celebration, the victory the salvation we long for will never end. We never forget his name, we gather to praise the name of Jesus in worship together with crowds of Christians all over the world and this crowd pictured in already in heaven, a crowd that includes many people we have known and loved.

On Tuesday people will be backing a horse or a President, staking their money or vote on one of them for the future. We put our faith in and cast our vote for the one who has won. We back the Lamb, putting faith and trust in him. We keep backing him all the way, even when we feel like losers, even when we are mocked for it, and even in the face of death. The lamb who was slain, who was whipped and flogged and put down on the cross and everyone thought was gone, this Lamb of God came from the back of the field, from out of the grave itself and he offers to share his winnings, his life, salvation with us. We Aussies have a reputation for betting on anything – even flies walking up a wall. Squillions will be squandered on the Melbourne Cup. In life there seems to be no sure thing. But in this Revelation given to us today by God he reminds us that if you want to be sure about your place in this gathering of saints in heaven, "if you want a certainty" then Jesus is it. If you want to get on a winner forget about the horses, or human beings with power and influence. Get behind the Lamb. Even a mug punter should be able to see that the suffering crucified Lamb of God who went through death and hell and came out again and promises the quality of life revealed to us in this heavenly vision deserves to be backed heavily with all the God-given faith we can muster.