

## **The Great Multitude** **Revelation 7:9-10**

It's a personal joy and great privilege to preach God's Word to this assembly. I thank Bishop Hicks for the invitation. I am honored to be in this parish that celebrates 131 years of ministry as a Reformed Episcopal church. Thank you as well to Paul, Beth, the vestry and congregation of Grace Church for graciously welcoming and feeding us. All of us are very encouraged with all the good renovation work you've done to the sanctuary and other parts of the facility.

I now realize I have the unenviable task to deliver a sermon at siesta time to a congregation with full bellies.

In late July, Jan and I visited Atonement Church, in anticipation of my consecration. Following services we met with Ebony Holloway, the parish coordinator for the event, her husband Jason and Dean Hawkins to go over some preliminaries. This visit coincided with the diocesan youth camp. Several young people from the parish would be going to camp that afternoon. Deacon Holloway lined up the young people in a long pew as he prepared to deliver the children's sermon. He had an object lesson prepared using Jason Junior's building blocks. He told them that the building blocks served an important function. They helped develop hand-eye coordination in little ones. He asked the young people, many of whom were attending camp, what they would like to take to camp; cell phones, MP3 players, tablet readers or the building blocks? We know what they preferred, however, Rev. Holloway reminded them that they were not permitted to take any electronics so that they might focus on spiritual matters. He suggested they take the building blocks as a reminder of why they were at camp -- to build upon the basics of the Christian faith and strengthen those fundamentals that are foundational. I would like to do the same thing this afternoon. I want to focus on the foundational aspect of discipleship in the life of Christ's Church.

From the Reformed Episcopal Mission Statement, we read the following:

*In addition to being evangelical, she is deeply committed to **discipleship**, the work of training evangelized men and women in Christian living. When the Gospel is truly proclaimed and the mercies of God are made known, redeemed men and women must be led to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, which is their spiritual service.*

The title of this sermon is "The Great Multitude" and the text is from the Epistle appointed for All Saints' Day, Revelation 7:9-10:

*After these things I looked, and behold, a great **multitude** which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

The book of Revelation was written by the Apostle John while exiled for his faith on the Isle of Patmos in Asia Minor near the end of the first century AD. It was written at a time when Christians were being persecuted because they refused to submit to the demand that they worship the emperor. The practice of cultic emperor worship was in full stride. This highly symbolic Scripture was written to encourage suffering Christians by reminding them that Jesus Christ is Lord and he will triumph over demonic forces at work in the world. The text describes the awesome scene in heaven that's revealed following the opening of the sixth seal. I will purposefully avoid conjectures this afternoon concerning the 144,000 and the meaning of the great tribulation. I will, however, make the point that the great multitude are God's people in his heavenly kingdom. We're provided with a comforting picture of victory, completeness and divine worship. It's a scene that describes what one may call the bottom line -- the culmination of history, the ingathering of God's complete harvest of redeemed people.

How do we arrive at this heavenly scene? Obviously it's all due to the grace of God, but we also need to remember that God's grace works through His obedient church and He has demanded that we make disciples of all nations.

We read in St. Matthew's Gospel,

*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (28:18-20)*

Prior to our Lord's ascension this affirmation was made,

*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

The innumerable multitude in Revelation 7:9 are faithful followers or disciples of Jesus Christ. The word 'multitude' in the original language is found 175 times in various forms in the New Testament. We associate it most often with the great crowds or multitudes that constantly followed the Lord Jesus. That is its usage in the Gospel lesson for All Saints in St. Matthew 5:1, *And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain...* He did so to teach His followers about the Kingdom. The word is translated multitude, crowd, people, throng, company, numbers and many. This word is used to reinforce the importance of disciple making in the life of the church. Please follow with me as we see the unfolding of God's plan for the ingathering of the great multitude in the book of Acts.

After the choosing and setting apart of 'the seven men of good reputation' to tend to the business of the daily distribution of food to the widows so that the Apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, we read, *Then the word of God*

*spread, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great **many** of the priests were obedient to the faith.* (Acts 6:7). The word translated 'many' in the New King James Version of Acts 6:7 is the same word translated 'multitude' in Revelation 7:9. Included among the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem were amazingly a great **many** priests.

In Acts 8:4-6 it is recorded, *Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the **multitudes** with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles that he did.* Following the martyrdom of Stephen the disciples were scattered. Philip went to Samaria to preach Christ and the people responded by heeding the word. The word **multitudes**, in the plural, is the same word used in Revelation 7:9.

Finally this reference from Acts 11:9-26:

*Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*

*Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many **people** were added to the Lord.*

*Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*

This is another reference to the scattering of believers following the martyrdom of Stephen. Some of these disciples traveled to lands occupied by Hellenists or Greeks who responded to the Gospel. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch and through his preaching others were brought into God's kingdom. The word translated **people** in verse 24 is the word translated 'multitude' in Revelation 7:9. And the disciples were first called Christians, 'those who belong to Christ', in Antioch.

What do we clearly see with the use of this one word in the book of Acts? We see a pattern of disciple making in direct relation to the great multitude in Revelation 7:9. Jesus said... *and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.* (Acts 1:8)

In Acts 6:7 **many** priests were converted in Jerusalem, in Acts 8:4-6 the **multitudes** with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip in Samaria and in Hellenist Antioch, as recorded in Acts 11:24, a great many **people** were added to the Lord. The entire enterprise was geared toward obeying Jesus' command to make disciples and the church expanded in dramatic fashion. This emphasis on the making of disciples is what we find in the 2004 Pastoral Letter on Mission written by our bishops. I read from its conclusion:

*First, just as God is the missionary God who creates the missionary church, we are certain that mission should become the center of everything we are and do as Anglican Christians. Each parish, diocese, committee and board should rethink its own mission in terms of THE MISSION for which Jesus Christ bought us with His blood on Golgotha. This will mean moving mission from the perimeter to the center of everything. It will require our parishes and dioceses to contemplate, pray for and set as an objective the expansion of their ministries into new mission: parishes daughtering parishes and dioceses growing into more dioceses.*

My dear friends, my great concern is that perhaps we've lost this focus in our Diocese. We obviously need to be concerned about budgets, buildings and filing our diocesan reports in a timely manner, however, we need to have disciple-making at the missional core of everything we do. In a recent edition of Leadership, John Ortberg, in an article entitled, "Our Presumptuous Calling", writes,

*We are not called to fill buildings or balance budgets or launch successful programs or grow at a ten percent growth rate. We are not called to be more successful than our peers in order to boost our self-esteem. We are not called upon to dream up the next big post-seeker, post-emergent, post-missional ministry trend.*

And I add, but we are commanded to make disciples of all nations.

When Suffragan Bishop George David Cummins wrote his letter of resignation to the Bishop Ordinary of the Diocese of Kentucky he wrote, *I have an earnest hope and confidence that the basis for union of all evangelical Christendom can be found in the doctrine of justification by faith.* The union of all evangelical Christendom was his vision then and I doubt there has been a more promising time, since then, to see that vision fulfilled as in our very own time. Large and supposedly successful mega-churches are admitting they have not been making disciples. Many bemoan the fact that today there is no such thing as an evangelical center. The Reformed Episcopal Church has everything in place to be leaders in the evangelical world. But please keep in mind that it must begin and end with the making of disciples. God has given us no other plan or direction for His Church and the salvation of the world. The process whereby this is done is in place in our church -- the doctrine, worship, catechetical structure and the historical witness. We are a founding jurisdiction of the Anglican Church in North America that has been actively promoting the planting of new churches through the Anglican 1000 Movement. The Catechesis Task Force is hard at work to produce a document that will further help to produce disciples.

I leave you this afternoon with three challenges. Let's think of little Jason Junior's building blocks to help us build a foundation of ABC:

A. I challenge each rector and vicar in our Diocese to study the biblical teaching of discipleship with their people. Every confirmand is asked by the bishop, *Will you follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?* To follow or be a disciple of Jesus Christ is not just the classical student/teacher relationship. Christian discipleship is the way of the cross unto death. This aspect of following Christ has been primarily lost in our 'come to Jesus' culture.

B. I also encourage each pastor to read and reread the bishop's Pastoral Letter on Mission that will help define what we're all about. This was not a letter written just for 2004. It was given to direct our path into the future. Some have already studied the document with their people. We need to recapture and reapply its message and intent. The document is found on the denominational website. I'm asking Greg Wright to please post this document on our diocesan website.

C. Finally, pray with me that we will, by God's grace, be a disciple-making church. Please pray that we will move mission to the center of everything we do. My prayer is that each parish, the Diocese and the entire Denomination will be devoted to these foundational fundamentals so that in the innumerable **multitude** of Revelation 7:9 will be found an ever increasing number of saints disciplined in the Reformed Episcopal Church.

AMEN.