Pondering the passage from the Book of Revelation I wonder, who are these people that belong to this great crowd that stand before God and that are being taking care of by God and that enjoy God’s loving care day and night?

It is said that they are the ones that have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them clean in the blood of the Lamb. Those that make it to heaven are those in white robes.

But notice that the Bible does not say that these people have kept their clothes clean *all the time*. It does not say that they never had gotten dirty. Rather, they have had their robes washed. They had been dirty. The people that make it into heaven are not the ones that have kept themselves from messing up. They are the ones that have been washed.

For those of us who mess up a lot, this is our hope: in Jesus Christ I am washed all the time. No one who makes it into heaven is good enough to be there by avoiding getting dirty.

Consider what kind of people are already there, the great persons that we read about in the Bible. There is David, the great king of Israel. He was an adulterer. And later, when his adultery was about to be disclosed, he became a murderer, to cover it up. Consider the great apostle Paul. He was an accessory to murder. When the mob stoned Stephen to death, Paul stood by and watched and gave his assent to what they did. Consider the apostle Peter. At the most crucial moment in Jesus' life, Peter denied that he had ever known him. These are the kinds of people that are giants in heaven. Adulterers, murderers, and even people who deny knowing Jesus. But who are we to judge? That’s the point – we are not to judge because they are God’s people. They have washed their robes and made them clean in the blood of Jesus. Their robes are not clean because they had kept them clean by getting everything right. They had gotten dirty but were made clean again.

In the New Testament, the word “saints” is used to describe the entire membership of the Christian community, and in the Collect for All Saints’ Day the word “elect” is used in a similar sense.

From very early times, however, the word “saint” came to be applied primarily to persons of heroic sanctity, whose deeds were recalled with gratitude by later generations.

We love our heroes. Whether it be outstanding sports people, men and women who save lives, people who put out fires, people who win things…however we want to frame it we like to have heroes to make us feel better, to give us a spirit of optimism when things are looking dull or even hopeless. Consider those lines from Revelation once more:

*‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God…*’

These people have come thorough a great ordeal and they have emerged to a new life. They have not necessarily performed extraordinary feats of daring, or leadership or achievement. But they are saintly because they are God’s people.

It is a tragedy that many people will not emerge from the ordeal of the current pandemic. Lives have been lost and it looks like many more will be lost. There is a tendency to look for saints – people we will applaud and thanks and hold up as examples of virtuous living; and to look for sinners – those who have got it wrong, who have made bad decisions, who have broken the rules. We know that it is all so much more complicated than being right or wrong, that we cannot divide the world equally between saints and sinners, however much we might like to neaten things up that way.

1 John: *Beloved, we are God’s children now…*

The fact is that for Christian people, all people are God’s elect, all people are God’s communion, all people are God’s great crowd. That probably means we will have to dig deep to find the inner saint within us to forgive those we blame, to respect those we hate, and to listen to those who we fail to understand.