

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

In the name of him 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, dear friends in Christ: The faithful early risers who attend the Thursday morning Bible study will recognize *this* as the infamous *book*. As you can tell, it's seen better days. It's my custom to begin the study by reviewing historical events that happened on the day's date, culminating with any observances marked by the Church. In the past, before I relied on *the book*, there'd be dates on which the Church had no celebrations or commemorations that I was aware of; but no more. This book, called *The Lives of the Saints*, which was printed in 1887 and bears the official imprimatur of Rome, has a saint for every day of the year.

Some of these saints are people whose stories you know from the Bible: St. Peter, St. Paul, and so on. Others are saints from later in history whose names you are familiar with like Patrick of Ireland, Francis of Assisi, and Athanasius, for example. The vast majority, however, are people you've probably never heard of. And for many of them there's just no other way to say it: the accounts of their lives as recorded in this book are the stuff of myth and legend, not history. Indeed, though presented as 100% accurate accounts, there's enough baloney in here to make 1000 sandwiches. Fantastic tales of miracles performed, mobs of heathens converted, and heroic deeds done. But mostly outrageous accounts of personal piety: how they renounced all worldly wealth and pleasures, how they prayed and fasted constantly – some going years on end with nothing to eat except the host at Holy Communion, how they dedicated their lives to caring for the poor and suffering, and how they earnestly sought martyrdom and smiled with sweet satisfaction while being tortured to death; yes, lives so near to moral perfection lacking any hint of sin's shadow that it's a wonder they acknowledged they needed a Savior to die for them at all.

Of course the point in presenting these saints as living on a higher plane of moral existence than the rest of us lowly mortals is that we should strive to be like them. They are examples for us of godly behavior. They did it. You can do it too. So imitate the saints in their pious living and thus be closer to God.

How very different is the account of the lives of the saints that we get from another book: the one the Church is founded on, which is God's Holy Word. Today's reading from Hebrews is the culmination of what is called the great chapter on faith. In it the author runs through a long list of saints: Abel whose offering was pleasing to the Lord; Noah who built the ark and was saved from the flood with his family; Abraham and Sarah who in their old age became the parents of Isaac, who was later taken to Moriah to be sacrificed by his father; Jacob who on his death bed blessed the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel; Joseph who was sold into slavery, saved the ancient world from death by famine, and later prophesied of the exodus; Moses who left his position as a prince of Egypt to lead the enslaved Israelites through the Red Sea and to the Promised Land; and many others – others who as we heard "conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouth of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight.

In short, they did great things in the service of the Lord; but what's interesting is that they are not held up before us because of what they did or any outstanding qualities they possessed;

no, they commended to us for their faith. As the author introduces each one, he begins *by faith* so and so did such and such. It's the theme that's repeated over and over again throughout the chapter: by faith, Abel ... by faith Noah ... by faith Abraham ... The point is that it's not their heroic deeds or profound piety that we are to imitate, but rather their faith, their faith in the Lord who through them accomplished great things.

They are for us a great cloud of witnesses; not that they are watching us and cheering us on like sports fans in a stadium; but rather that they are testifying to us. By their lives recorded for us in Scripture they are witnessing to us of the Lord's mighty deeds so that our faith in the Lord might be strengthened and sustained; so that we like them will be able to stand fast in faith, suffer the hardships, face the mocking and ridicule, and run with endurance the race that is set before us whatever it may entail.

It needs to be emphasized that this faith is not a generic or abstract thing. Faith has an object. It's not just "I believe", it's "I believe in Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who suffered and died for sin, who rose on the third day, and who ascended to the right hand of the throne of God." The Old Testament saints looked forward to Christ's coming to save them because they believed the promises of God. And in their lives they showed their faith by their actions. Abel's sacrifice was pleasing to the Lord because it foreshadowed the atoning sacrifice of God's Son. The ark Noah built and by which he was saved was a picture of Christ who saves us from God's judgment against sin. Abraham and Sarah trusting that God would give them a son when because of their old age it was impossible for them to conceive is a picture of the whole Old Testament people of God trusting that he would send the Son of promise – and that he would be born of miraculous means. Abraham having to take Isaac to Moriah to present him as a burnt offering is an illustration of God the Father taking God the Son to the place of sacrifice where they would do what in the end was not required of Abraham and Isaac.

I could go on, but I think you get the point: the Old Testament saints were given types and shadows that pointed them ahead to what God's Son would do when he came into the world as a man. And they believed. We in our day have the complete revelation. We look back upon Christ's accomplished work on the cross. It's the same faith, but now the whole story is in view. It's like they had pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle which they set in place and trusted in while we have the full picture. And in that sense, we have a decided advantage over them: the object of our faith is complete. This is all the more reason that we should be empowered by the Lord to live – and to die – by faith just as they did.

Therefore let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the founder and completer of our faith. By so doing, we will complete the courses the Lord has laid out for us, and in the end join that great multitude arrayed in white robes gathered around the throne of God: all the saints of old and of present, sinners saved by grace praising God and giving glory to the Lamb by whose blood we were bought and cleansed. God grant it to us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!