

A Great Cloud of Witnesses

In the name of him who for us endured the cross, despising the shame, and now sits at the right hand of the throne of God, dear friends in Christ: The eleventh chapter of Hebrews, a portion of which we heard as today's Epistle, is often called the chapter on the great heroes of faith. In it the divinely inspired author gives us a "who's who" in the faithful hall of fame; names like: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and (interestingly enough) Rahab the Canaanite prostitute. Last week we heard an earlier portion of the same chapter in which we heard listed such names as Abel, who by faith offered an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord; Enoch, who by faith walked with God and was translated into heaven without suffering death; Noah, who, having been warned by God of the flood, by faith constructed the ark which became the vehicle of salvation for him and his family; and Sarah, who by faith in the promise of God was given the power to conceive though she was far beyond the age of childbearing. And these are not all the names, for the list continues even beyond today's reading to include such luminaries as Gideon, Samson and some of the other judges, David, Samuel and the rest of the prophets; many of whom are referred to not by name but rather by what God accomplished through them by their faith; noteworthy deeds such as conquering and administering kingdoms, shutting the mouths of lions, quenching the flames meant to destroy them, and even raising the dead.

All together these saints whose lives and stories are set down for us in sacred Scripture are described as a "great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us". Over the years I've run into people who a bit confused about what that means to say that they are witnesses. They think that what the writer of Hebrews is saying is that these illustrious forebears of our faith – and indeed others who have gone before us to include our loved ones who've died – are witnesses in the sense that they are watching us. Having finished their course they now sit in the bleachers, so to speak, watching us as we run our course of faith, alternately cheering us on from the sidelines or (presumably) looking away in disgust and disappointment when we fail.

Now, I don't know about you, but I find that thought to be pretty creepy: the idea that thousands of invisible human eyes are on me intently watching my every move. Yes, I know the Lord is always watching; but quite frankly he knows me a whole lot better. There are things in my life that the neighbors are simply not welcome to see – and I think you can relate. Fortunately, that understanding is wrong. The departed saints in glory are not watching us. To imagine that they are would be to ascribe them powers reserved to God alone. Besides, most of the time it would be cruel indeed for the Lord to subject them to such a piteous spectacle. They've suffered enough already in their lives. There's no cause to force them to endure by observation our trials and tribulations as well.

No, they are witnesses in the sense that they are bearing testimony to us. The lives they lived, the things they accomplished by faith that are recorded for us in the pages of Holy Scripture, these bear witness of the faithfulness of the Lord who called them, who sustained them in their trials, who kept them faithful until death, and who ultimately crowned them with glory. Through the written Word of God these witnesses still speak to us today in order to encourage us as we continue struggling here below to finish the course that's been laid out before us.

And since they are witnesses presented by God for our benefit, we ought to pay close attention to their testimony. So let's do that. Let's sit up, lean forward, and take to heart the

witness that they give. And as we do, let's also consider that there's more to a witness than his or her words. If you've ever been on jury duty – or just watched Perry Mason or other courtroom drama on TV – you know that even before a witness begins to speak they begin make an impression on you, for better or worse. It's what they're wearing, their body language, how they conduct themselves, whether they look trustworthy or kind of scummy – you're taking all this in, and in the end it adds or subtracts from the things they have to say.

The same is true of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. And what we can't help noticing about them is that though they are called heroes of faith, there's really nothing heroic about them. As a rule they are not people of great talent or ability, not natural leaders, not unusually big, strong, good looking, or intelligent. Some of them are not even very likable. No, they show themselves to be weak and sinful. At times their faith wavers and fails. They suffer episodes of fear and doubt. They make a lot of mistakes. In other words, they are not at all like the noble heroes of the ancient mythologies of the pagans; quite the opposite, they are normal people, miserable fallen sinners, just like you and me.

And that, in a weird sort of way, makes their testimony far more credible than it would be if they were amazing super-humans. They are believable because they are real people. And more than just believable, this also makes their testimony *applicable* to us because of what they're saying. They are telling us, "Yes, we ourselves are nothing. On our own we could have accomplished nothing. But by God's call and the faith he gave us, he did amazing things through us. And yes, at times we couldn't see how it could happen that the Lord's promises to us would be fulfilled. In our trials and tribulations we lost patience and gave into despair. But the Lord is rich in mercy. He lifted us up and sustained us in our trials. By God's faithfulness to us, we made it. We endured. We carried our crosses until the end – by the faith God gave us. And therefore so can you. Trust in the Lord. He will keep his Word to you, for it is impossible for him to fail. We are proof of it."

That is their general testimony to us, the witness they give together – and we can take it to heart – but in a more specific way, I'd like you to see that they all testify about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's fitting that they do so because it's through Jesus that God keeps his Word to us. It all depends on him. And indeed, he's the one we are directed to place our trust in: the founder and perfecter of our faith.

But maybe you're wondering how the witnesses mentioned in today's reading could be testifying about Jesus. They lived and died over a thousand years before the Savior's birth. They never laid eyes on him. How can they give us eye-witness testimony? The answer is in the story of their lives. In the things they did by faith in the Word and Promises of God, they reveal to us facets of the Lord Jesus and his saving work for us.

Consider Abraham whom God gave the ultimate test of faith. He was told to offer his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering for sin. Now, a father's love for his son would make such a task nearly unthinkable; but further complicating matters was that Abraham knew that all the promises God made to him – to make of him a great nation and give him the Promised Land – all of this depended upon Isaac living, growing up, and having children. How in the world can God do that if Isaac is dead? We're told that Abraham so firmly believed the promises of God that he reasoned "If Isaac dies as a sacrifice by my hand, the Lord will raise him up again." Say it another way: Abraham believed in the resurrection of the child of promise after he was killed as an offering for sin. And that, my friends, is what we are asked to believe in: the resurrection of God's own Child of Promise after he gave his life as an offering for our sins. In Abraham's story, we see Christ and his Gospel revealed.

“By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.” There’s a sordid story. You remember how it goes: Isaac is old and nearly blind. He wants to bless his beloved firstborn son, Esau; so he sends him out to hunt up and prepare his favorite meal of venison so they can feast together and then, after they’ve dined, Isaac will bless his son. Ah, but is Rebekah is listening in. She decides to put her favorite son Jacob forward to get the blessing instead. So she fixes the meal, substituting goat meat. And she dresses Jacob in Esau’s robe, putting goatskins on the back of his neck and forearms so he will feel to Isaac like his hairy older brother. Isaac is fooled by the scheme, and Jacob gets the blessing. Esau returns having done what the father asked, only to find his blessing already taken. And when he demands a blessing Isaac gives only curses instead – it’s all he has left.

But this is our story. The Father wants to bless his beloved Son. He sends him out to do his will. But along comes our mother the Church. Through baptism she clothes us in Christ our older brother – in his sacrifice, represented by the goatskins, and in his righteousness represented by the robe. And over a meal which is the Father’s last will and testament, he gives us the blessing that properly belongs to his beloved Son. And Jesus, who did what his Father asked, gets the curse we deserved by our sins.

“By faith Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph.” That story might not be as familiar. Recall that Joseph was Jacob’s favorite son. His brothers hated him for it, so they sold him into slavery and he was carried off to Egypt. Jacob goes 20 years or more believing the Joseph is dead. Meanwhile Joseph suffers in slavery, is falsely accused, and ends up in prison. But in a surprising turn of events he rises to become the prime minister of Egypt. He saves that corner of the ancient world from a terrible famine. And while he’s doing that he marries an Egyptian wife and has two sons by her. Much later, when Jacob and Joseph are reunited, Jacob decides to adopt these two sons of Joseph and make them his own. It’s to raise their status and their share in the inheritance. But look what happens: through the son who died and rose again, other descendants are given the full right of sons. Again, that’s our story: through Jesus, the Son of God who died and rose again, we are made the children of the heavenly Father – with all the inheritance rights and blessings that entails.

“By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months.” You know that story. The Pharaoh of Egypt had decreed that all newly born Israelite boys were to be drowned in the Nile. But Moses’ parents hid him as long as they could. Finally Moses’ mother fashioned a small floating ark, and set her son adrift in the river. He was discovered by the Pharaoh’s daughter, who adopted him, effectively making him a member of the royal family. The king who had decreed Moses’ death now became his father of sorts.

I’ll bet most of you already know where I’m going with this. We are born under the curse and wrath of God. He has decreed our death for sin. But again, along comes Mother Church who puts us in an ark she has prepared. It’s the body of Christ which we enter into through Baptism. We go into the water protected by him. Everyone not in him drowns. And then we are discovered. We’re adopted into the royal family of God. The King who demanded our death has now become our Father.

“By faith Moses, having grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.” That’s right. He set aside his glory and exalted position as a prince of the kingdom to identify with the slaves and to rescue them—just like the Son of God stepped down from his heavenly glory to become one with us in our humanity and enslavement to sin in order to set us free.

“By faith Moses kept the Passover, and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.” Yes: God’s people delivered from slavery and death by the blood of the lambs and the death of Egypt’s firstborn—just as we are saved from the slavery of sin and everlasting death by the blood of the Lamb of God and the death of the Father’s first born and only-begotten Son.

“By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry ground; but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.” It’s Baptism again. The people of God pass safely through the water to freedom and to a new birth as a nation. And sin, death, and Satan – all that would try to hold us in bondage – are destroyed.

“By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with the disobedient when the walls of Jericho fell.” No, she feared the Lord and his judgments. She renounced her sinful and pagan ways. She renounced her earthly citizenship in Jericho. She received the agents of God when they entered her city and hid them from those who wanted to capture and kill them. When the city fell, her life was spared, and she became a part of God’s chosen people Israel. And in this she stands for all those who know this world is coming to an end, and who fear the coming wrath and judgment of God, but who also receive the Lord’s agents, the messengers of the Good News, and extract promises of salvation in Christ from them. Rahab’s story shows that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for all people – all who will repent and believe the Good News.

And now she, together with all the others we’ve considered, is part of that great cloud of witnesses who are testifying to us of Jesus Christ and his saving work on our behalf. Why? So that we too will believe; so that we too will have faith; so that we too will persevere in life’s trials trusting in the Lord’s unfailing love for us in Christ Jesus; so that when the road becomes difficult, long, and dreary, that we not grow weary or fainthearted; but look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Friends, there’s a seat for you there too. The same joy is set before you. Jesus assures us that it’s true. And he’s given us this great cloud of witnesses to confirm his faithfulness and to help show us the way to carry our crosses as they did, by faith in the Son of God. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!