

## "SURROUNDED BY WITNESSES"

TEXT: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...."

(Hebrews 12: 1 and 2 a)

INTRODUCTION Yesterday, the Christian Church celebrated All Saints Day. Today is All Souls Day. Let the "low" churchmen among us who view the Christian year with some indifference entertain the possibility that our fathers in the faith who put the calendar together many centuries ago did it for our own good. November 1st. All Saints Day. November 2nd. All Souls Day.

These two days invite us to think of the dead - our beloved dead in Christ - and of our relationship to them. It calls from the deep places of the heart thoughts about graves and cemeteries, ashes and urns, final illnesses and death-bed promises, Good Friday and Easter. And this in the Fall of the year when the frost is on the pumpkin, not in the Spring when a wavering faith might lean for support on analogies from the world of nature.

And to help us feel our way into the meaning of All Saints Day, I propose that we enlist that mighty utterance with which the 12th chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews opens. One of the most unfortunate chapter divisions in the Bible occurs right here. The 11th chapter of Hebrews recounts the deeds of such stalwarts of the faith as Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Issac, Moses, Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, Samuel and a host of others. Our text properly concludes and climaxes that chapter. It really should be known as Hebrews 11:41 instead of Hebrews 12:1, and here it is:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..."

DEVELOPMENT The purpose of the writer, whoever he might have been, was to encourage Christians who were becoming disheartened. This is a late letter as New Testament letters go. The first flush of novelty had long since faded and Christian living was now a day in, day out, odds-against struggle with a culture that either disdained the faith or rose up to persecute it. It's quite likely that some in that fellowship had already sealed their faith with their blood.

But how to encourage such men and women? How to get them to remain faithful, to hold to the vision....no easy task! He didn't try to minimize the problems they were facing in bearing witness to the Word in a hostile, indifferent cultural environment. What he did attempt was to provide these dispirited Christians with a sense of continuity with ages past and ages still to come.

A company of witnesses surrounds you like a cloud! The enterprise that claims you did not begin with you nor will it end with you. The metaphor is

powerful, suggesting a huge amphitheater with those on earth being present on the track and the stands filled with those who have already won the victory.

SO YOU THINK YOU HAVE IT TOUGH

So you think you have it tough? Consider those who once were out there where you are and who overcame. We have enough models of failure in our society. A few models of victory would help. Look to the witnesses. Remember they did it. Remember how they did it. By keeping on eye on Jesus. It can be done. You can do it, too.

You say that things are going too fast for your good? Abraham, tell them what it was like going from Ur on a journey to an unknown land. You say you're having trouble trying to get free? Moses, tell them how you stayed with it long enough to spring your people out of Egypt. You say you feel funny believing in God when so many of your friends do not? Noah, speak up...tell them what it was like building a boat on dry land while even the carpenters wondered and laughed their heads off at you!

You say at times you wonder whether faith has a future? Joseph, you tell them how you saw in your dying hours in Egypt that your bones would some day rest in the land that God had promised. You say you feel unequal to the day and over-matched. Samson, tell them how a strong man can be even stronger when he lets something of God's power come in to his life.

You say you feel guilty, compromised and unworthy? Rahab, tell them how even a fallen woman can be justified by faith. You say you feel it's hard to see how God can work through forms that are not familiar? Samuel, tell them how the faith survived when theocracy gave way to monarchy and Saul was made a King.

WHY? Why is it that every generation is so arrogant and so slow to learn the uses of the past? So prone to practice a parochialism of time? So enamored of its novelties. ~~So sure that it stands at history's Waterloo? Does this explain the melancholy that has robbed us of our song?~~

*Good!* Look around about you to that cloud of witnesses. It never has been exactly a cakewalk to hold that faith is stronger than sight; that truth is stronger than falsehood; that love is stronger than hate; that life is stronger than death; that Easter is mightier than Good Friday. But it can be done. We are not an isolated chapter in a miscellaneous collection of short stories. Rather our life is a chapter in a story that is unified by a single plot, a story that is moving toward an end that is good.

Let us be teachable before the witnesses. We are only later than our fathers, not always wiser.

~~"With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud" as the New English Bible translates it.~~ The main intent of the writer was to encourage the disheartened. But in all of this it is important to note that however much help we may receive from the examples of our departed heroes of the faith, our primary help is from Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

*omit* The degree to which the dead in Christ participate in our lives, the frequency and depth of their communication with us, the living, here on earth, is a subject that is being explored and one before which I feel we must keep an open mind.

*Omit* [ ~~But there can be no questioning of the fact that the main source of strength for the witnesses - and for us - is Jesus. As our text reminds us:~~

~~"Let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus - the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith...."~~

For it is He who connects us up with God. It is He who reunites us with the "ground!" and the source of our being.

CLOSING

Henry Sloane Coffin was both wise and sympathetic when to a young man whose finance had died he wrote:

"I have just learned of the very great sorrow that has come to you. It could not be a sorer lost. You have my heart with you in tender sympathy. There is nothing to say but that God remains, and He is home for those who go and for us who stay, and in Him we still meet and are one. Your life as it moves along in His purposes will never be remote from hers".

And about that life which is to come, God told us only a little - lest our heads and hearts be turned from the present and its needs. Our steadying inner gyroscope throughout the years and beyond is the abiding knowledge that God cares! And in that moment in which man ceases in death to be able to have a relationship to himself and the world, God's relationship with him continues. "Take no thought for the morrow" said Jesus...."what you shall eat, or what you shall drink or what you shall put on". This counsel, I believe, holds whether that tomorrow opens on this side or the other.

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote those memorable lines which says it for me and hopefully also for you:

"I know not what the future hath of marvel or surprise,  
Assured alone that life and death His mercy underlies.  
And so beside the silent sea I wait the muffled oar:  
No harm from Him can come to me on ocean or on shore.

I know not where his islands lift their froned palms in air;  
I only know I cannot drift beyond His love and care.  
And thou, O Lord, by whom are seen, Thy creatures as they be,  
Forgive me if too close I lean my human heart on Thee."

PRAYER

As we are surrounded by the dedicated lives of Your faithful people, O God, help us to catch a vision of the things they saw, to learn from them as we know them more and more, and keep us - each one of us - loyal to the One they knew and loved and served, that quietly but surely our light may be added to theirs and our deeds may help to answer the needs of our world.

When we are tempted to be discouraged, remind us of the race they once ran, and give us the will and the courage to follow in their steps, knowing that the race is worth the running and that it runs out into light and joy and peace and fellowship with you.

In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.