

TEXT: "With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud, we must throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus".

(Hebrews 12: 1 NEB)

INTRODUCTION On Wednesday of this past week, the Christian Church celebrated All Saints Day. Let the "low" churchmen among us who view the Christian year with some indifference or suspicion at least entertain the possibility that our fathers in the faith who put the calendar together did it for our own good. November 1st. All Saints Day.

For All Saints Day invites 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 Sunday. 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 nature.

To help us feel our way into the meaning of All Saints Sunday 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:

"With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud, we must throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus".

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 likely that some in that early fellowship had already sealed their faith with their blood.

to remain faithful, to hold to the vision?

But how to encourage such men and women? It is significant that the author did not attempt to minimize the problems that people face when bearing witness to their faith in a hostile 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. It can be done.

You say that things are changing 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, tell them what it was like building a boat on dry land while even the carpenters laughed their heads off at you.

You say 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 when he lets 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 find it hard to see God when familiar forms are abruptly set aside? Samuel, tell them how the faith survived when theocracy gave way to monarchy and Saul was made a king. "With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud"

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?

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. As Leroy Smith has put it,

"I have examined
The code of our ancestors
And found it foolish;

But I will not burn
Their palaces, nor erase
Their names and labours;

For they, our fathers,
Faced the rogue bulls of chaos
And dreamt of order;

All our rebellion
Stems from their dreaming courage
And owes it honor".

FROM JESUS

With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud".

The main intent of the writer was to encourage the disheartened. But in all of this it is important to note that however much auxiliary help we may receive from the examples of our departed heroes of faith, our primary help is from Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith.

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 and a welcoming mind.

But there can be no questioning of the fact that the main source of strength for the witnesses and for us is Jesus. As the text puts it,

"We must throw off every incumbrance, every sin to which we cling and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus".

For it is He who connect us with God. It is He who reunites us with the "ground" and the "source" of our true being.

CLOSING

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

"I have just learned of the very great sorrow that has come to you. It could not be a sorer loss. 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".

About the life 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 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 tomorrow" 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 says it for me and I hope for you:

"I know not what the future hath of marvel or surprise,
Assured along 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 fringed 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, O God, by the dedicated lives of Your faithful people, 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 of us - loyal to the One they knew and loved, 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 to us the will and the courage to follow in their train, knowing that the race is worth the running and that it runs out into light and joy and ~~ppace~~ peace and fellowship with You.

In the name and spirit of Jesus, the author and finisher of our Faith.