

The Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10
<i>Response</i>	Lord, come to my aid!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 40:2, 3, 4, 18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 12:1-4
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord; I know them, and they follow me.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 12:49-53

The 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time brings us to a very famous passage from the letter to the Hebrews. It's in Hebrews 12:1-4, the famous description of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. This is what it says:

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, 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.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.¹

Okay. What's going on here? Well, Hebrews 12 — this is very important — comes right after Hebrews 11. And the reason that's so significant is in Hebrews 11, you have the famous catalog of all of these various saints and figures from the Old Testament who exemplified the virtue of faith. And so what's happening in chapter

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

12 is a kind of summary statement that follows from the catalog of the Old Testament saints and the witness of their faith, of what the implications are for the readers of the letter to the Hebrews.

For our purpose here, I want to hone in and focus on, most important of all, the image of the “cloud of witnesses,” that's a very well-known image, but it's also somewhat nebulous. Sorry about that, it's just I couldn't pass up the pun. All right. So what is he referring to here? Well, in Greek, when he says a cloud of witnesses, the Greek word is *martyrōn*. Now we might think he means, "Oh, cloud of martyrs," but he doesn't mean a cloud of people, a group of people who've been put to death for the sake of Christ. Remember, *martyreō* in Greek means to bear witness or to give testimony, so what he's describing there is the list of all of those Old Testament saints that he's just finished cataloging in chapter 11. He's describing them as a cloud of witnesses, of souls, of people who give testimony to faith in God, who bear witness to God and to the truth of his promises.

And what Paul seems to be describing here, this is really powerful, is the fact that although all of the people that he's mentioned in chapter 11 are dead, they've all passed away, they are still not only alive to God, but they somehow surround the members of the church on earth, like a cloud descending from heaven to envelop them and surround them even in the present, although they've already passed away. So what the author of Hebrews is describing here is it's a description of all of the figures from the Old Testament and from salvation history that he's just cataloged chapter 11, all of whom are dead. It's an assertion that they are somehow not just still alive to God, but that they surround the saints on earth like a cloud of witnesses, just like a cloud might descend from heaven and surround us. Think here of, for example, the transfiguration where the cloud overshadows Peter and James and John. You have these two Old Testament saints, Elijah and Moses, appear and are conversing with Jesus. So too, the letter of the Hebrews here is saying that we are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses from the Old Testament.

Now, where does the author of Hebrews get this idea that even though the saints of the Old Testament are dead, they can somehow still surround Christians on earth, believers on earth. And the answer is he gets it from Jewish tradition. In this case, from the Catholic Old Testament, but not from the Jewish Scriptures. So there's a very important passage that frequently gets overlooked from the second book of Maccabees, which is in the Catholic Old Testament, but not in the Protestant Old

Testament and not in the contemporary Jewish Bible either. In 2 Maccabees 15, there's a description of two figures from Jewish history who had died, but who continued to be aware of what the Jewish people were doing on earth. And not just to be aware, but to be present to them, to intercede for them and to even be able to communicate with them. In other words, it's a description of the communion, or we what we would call the communion of the saints — although this is the communion of the Old Testament saints. So in the book of 2 Maccabees 15:12, listen to this description of a vision that was had by Judas Maccabeus, one of the leaders of Maccabean Revolt, of two deceased figures, Onias, the high priest and Jeremiah, the prophet. This is what it says:

What he saw was this: Oni'as, who had been high priest, a noble and good man, of modest bearing and gentle manner, one who spoke fittingly and had been trained from childhood in all that belongs to excellence, was praying with outstretched hands for the whole body of the Jews. Then likewise a man appeared, distinguished by his gray hair and dignity, and of marvelous majesty and authority. And Oni'as spoke, saying, "This is a man who loves the brethren and prays much for the people and the holy city, Jeremiah, the prophet of God."

What 2 Maccabees is describing here, and this is written by a Jewish author during the second temple period, so it would reflect the beliefs of Jews at the time of Jesus, is that the High Priest, Onias, and the Prophet Jeremiah, who were both righteous men, are not only aware of what's happening to the Jewish people on earth, but they are actively praying for the Jewish people on earth through intercession, and able to speak to certain representatives of the Jewish people, like Judah himself, and be encouraged in the face of the trials and tribulations that they were going through at the time of the Maccabean Revolt. So what this text bears witness to, this is very important, is an Old Testament foundation for the Catholic belief and Orthodox as well, that although figures from the Old Testament have died, they still are alive to God, and not just alive to God but able to intercede for the saints on earth. So we have an Old Testament scriptural foundation for the intercession of the saints.

So if we take that basic idea back to the letter to the Hebrews, and we go back to Hebrews 12, we can then see what Hebrews is doing with it. So what the letter to the Hebrews is doing here is saying that because we are surrounded by so great a

cloud of witnesses, in other words, because the saints of the Old Testament who lived lives of faith themselves while they were on earth, continue to be present to us and surround us, therefore, “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.” In other words, just as the Old Testament saints exhibited not just faith, but perseverance in following the path that God had laid out for them, so too we who are surrounded by the saints, must follow the path of perseverance, the path of faith, and run the race that is set for us.

Now pause here for a second, this is a fascinating use of a metaphor because the letter to the Hebrews appears to be describing the relationship between the saints in heaven, or the saints who have gone on, and the saints on earth like the participants in a race at an amphitheater. It was very popular in the 1st century AD. You had chariot races and so the stands would be filled with all of the fans, and then you'd have the racers who were in their chariots. If you've ever seen Ben-Hur or one of these films, you would get a kind of visual idea of what I'm talking about with the chariot races. They were very popular, extremely popular. And so what Hebrews is kind of doing here is comparing the saints on earth...they're like the charioteers. They're running the race. And then the saints who have gone before us, the cloud of witnesses, are like the crowds cheering us on and encouraging us, interceding for us so that we too might run with perseverance the race that is set before us. So it's kind of an interesting image there, and the chief charioteer of them all is Christ himself, looking to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, 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.

Christ was the first one to run the race. He did it with perseverance, and the goal, the victory that He achieved, was resurrection from the dead and His ascension to the right hand of the Father. So that's the ultimate destination. That's the goal of our race as well, according to the author of the letter to the Hebrews. And for that reason, he wants to encourage his readers not to grow weary, not to give up, not to stop running. So he says:

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

So in other words, he recognizes that his readers are facing difficulties. They're facing trials. They're facing tribulations, and they're tempted to do what, frankly, anyone who has to run a long race might be tempted to do, which is to give up because you're growing weary. And Hebrew says here, don't do that. Instead, look to Christ as the pioneer, as the one who paved the way and realize that He did not give up, but He endured the cross. He despised the shame for the sake of the glory that was set before Him, which is not just the resurrection, but being seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly Jerusalem.

So in closing, I just want to end here with two quick points. First, if you get a chance, go back and read through all of Hebrews 11 if you want some real powerful examples of the kind of races that were run by the saints of the old covenant. I mean, we've already spoken about Abraham and Sarah, trusting God and being given the gift of children, the gift of the Promised Land. But he actually mentions other saints from the Old Testament, like King David, the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, Elijah, Isaiah, who according to Jewish tradition, Jeremiah was stoned to death. He was executed by his own people. Isaiah was sawn in half. He was cut in half, dismembered by Manasseh, the wicked king of Israel. The Maccabees themselves are actually mentioned in Hebrews 11. So, I mentioned the second book of Maccabees. Well, Hebrews 11 has a reference to what appears to be the mother of the Maccabees and those who despised being put to death because they trusted that they would receive their bodies back in the resurrection. So that's the kind of perseverance that the letter of the Hebrews is holding up for its readers as a model. You want to be a true martyr? You want to be a true witness to Christ? Then you should be willing to suffer even stoning, death by stoning like Jeremiah, or death by dismemberment by Isaiah, for the sake of the gospel. Don't give up. If you've not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood, then you haven't run the race all the way to the end, like the saints who came before you.

And the second point I would highlight is, in closing, from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It is no coincidence that when the catechism has a teaching on the intercession of the saints, it points to this text from Hebrews 12:1 and following, because as you're probably aware, there are some Christians who reject the idea of asking for the intercession of the saints. Usually, it's Christians from Protestant ecclesial communities who, by the way, don't have the book of 2 Maccabees in their Old Testaments. So you can understand why they might not have this clear scriptural reference to the intercession of the saints if they're missing that particular

book. But you don't really even need 2 Maccabees 15 to show that the saints that have died are not dead, but alive to God and actually attentive to the activities of believers on earth. All you need is Hebrews 12, because it's really clear when it says we're surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, that it's referring to the saints who have passed on already, who have gone before us. So in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2683, I just want to highlight for you how this text is interpreted officially by the Church, with regard to our belief in the article of faith, the communion of saints, but also our belief in the practice of the intercession of the saints for those who are on earth. This is what the Catechism says, and I quote:

The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom [cf. Heb 12:1], especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives, the transmission of their writings, and their prayer today. They contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth... Their intercession is their most exalted service to God's plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world. (CCC 2683)