

This passage celebrates the faith of many heroes of faith cited in the Hebrew Scriptures. Though it uses the word faith twenty-four times in 11:1-39 what it intends is closer to the meaning of *faithfulness*, obedience to God's will that enables us to persevere in the Christian life difficult as that may be. It is the rust what we mean when we say in the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Obviously, that goal is still not yet in sight. Gench puts it this way:

It enables believers to live by a vision of the reality of God and God's purposes for the earth, a vision that is not yet present or visible to the eye. It empowers believers to move into the future with trust and confidence, knowing that the future belongs to God.

On the other hand, this way of living involves risk and continuing struggle. To inspire courage and endurance in his audience, *Hebrews* brings forth a parade of heroes who lived by that vision. Each of the several sets of faith-heroes begins with the phrase "by faith." Beginning with three from the earliest chapters of Genesis, *Hebrews* then cites two of the central characters of Israel's long history, notably Abraham and Sarah (11:8-22).

Most significant about them is their pilgrim lifestyle all their successors followed. They were not dependent on what happened in this life of space and time. Essentially they were aliens moving toward a supernatural goal: life with God for eternity, i.e. *heaven*.

The parade continues with Moses and other Israelite heroes and heroines who struggled forward regardless of the suffering they endured, yet sustained by faith. Vss. 32-39 include a vivid list of named and unnamed heroes who experienced almost inconceivable human brutality.

For *Hebrews'* audience at the end of the 1st century, such suffering was potentially very real. To quote Gench:

Hebrews maintains that the saints of every generation are empowered to endure even to death if need be because they know that their destiny is in the hands of the unseen God whose promises are sure and because they know that God's purposes will not fail to be achieved despite all appearances the contrary.

So there is hope for our future because we stand with them waiting for the final realization of God's saving purposes. That has been realized symbolically in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The ultimate fulfillment will not be realized without us who believe in Christ (vs. 40).

The final section of this passage (12:1-2) presents a vision of a stadium with a great throng of spectators watching a foot race like those common in Greek and Roman times. The metaphor presents the spectators as believers of one generation and the runners of to the next generation linked in a relay race and passing the baton of faith.

Standing at the finish line is Jesus who pioneered the pilgrimage of faith, "enduring the cross" and by his sacrifice opening for us "a new and living way" to have access to God for us all (10:20). He empowers us to run the race with faith because he is "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2).

In four ways, *Hebrews* attempted to motivate and rejuvenate his audience: (1) He reminded them of what Christ had accomplished on their behalf and urged them to take advantage of it. (2) He once again warned them of the grave dangers of apostasy. (3) He recalled to their remembrance their exemplary earlier history. And (4) He challenged them to follow in the footsteps of all who went before them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who were some of the people who have contributed to your growth in faith?
2. A pilgrimage or journey is a common way of describing our spiritual experience throughout our lives. Is this an adequate metaphor for what has been a continuing experience or is there a better term you might use?
3. Two Greek words that appear in 11:1 are *hupostasis* and *grammaton*. One English translation of these could be *real being* and *skill in doing*, respectively. How do these express the experience of faith as a Christian living from day to day?
4. In 12:1-2 Jesus is described as “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” A preacher described his faith as “the religion of Jesus not a religion about Jesus.” In what way can we distinguish between these two definitions; or is it inappropriate to do so?

CLOSING PRAYER

Go with us, gracious God, that we may not wander from the path that Jesus has pioneered before us. Forgive us when we do, that by your grace we may truly become worthy of the name Christian. AMEN.

15 – THE GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Hebrews 11:1-12:2



A cemetery in Alexandria for people of many faith traditions.

OPENING PRAYER

We praise you, O God, that in Jesus we have a model to follow, as those who have gone before us have pioneered also on the way of life.

AMEN.