



The Word...

Brothers and sisters:

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us
and persevere in running the race that lies before us
while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus,
the leader and perfecter of faith.

(from Heb 12: 1-4)

Pondering the Word...

In the chapter right before today's passage from Hebrews, the author lists many figures from the Old Testament, our ancient ancestors in faith: Abraham, Moses, and David, of course, but also Rahab, the harlot who aided the Israelites; Samson, who died, bald and blind, with the Philistines; and, Jephthah, whose sad story we hear later this week. None of them perfect, yet they still persevered in faith despite not seeing fulfilled any of what was promised. Amazing individuals for sure, but they seem too distant, too removed for me to really relate.

I think it's a good idea for each of us to have our own cloud of witnesses, people who have gone before us--or those who are still with us--that we look to for support to rid ourselves of the burdens and sins of the past. Yes, we keep our eyes on Jesus and we learn through his example what perfect faith looks like, but we see it is not pretty or easy, so we also recognize the faith of others to strengthen our own.

We hear in Luke's Gospel Jesus' warning to the disciples about division and struggle in his name, even among close relatives and friends. The foreign gods that tempted the ancient Israelites are nothing compared to the challenges family division can cause, especially if you are alone in trying to maintain the faith.

Let's say a prayer of gratitude today to all those who make up our own unique cloud of witnesses. Ask them for their continued support and prayers. And let us also pray for those family members and friends who are struggling, without the benefit of knowing their own cloud of witnesses. Let us commit to stand by them—to be an unrecognized witness—*not crying aloud, not raising our voices, not breaking those who are bruised* (Is 42: 2-3) ... standing by them as Jesus stands by them: *"Though I am afflicted and poor, yet the LORD thinks of me."* (Ps 40)

Living the Word...

Have you ever thought about the people that make up your cloud of witnesses? Yes, it is wise to call upon Mary and Joseph, of course, and maybe a special saint or two, but what about a parent or grandparent or other relative—one who seemed to keep the faith in the face of hardship. Perhaps a neighbor or teacher who encouraged you to keep trying; friends who can relate to your life's story and struggles. For those who serve the poor, it is often those they serve that provide a powerful witness of faith. Make a list of these people and keep it on your phone or post it somewhere to remind you of their presence in your lives. Like Jesus, they are with you always to comfort, to strengthen, to pray.

Personal Reflections and Ideas...

Aug 19: *The children of Israel offended the LORD...Abandoning the LORD, the God of their fathers, they followed other gods of the various nations around them, and by their worship of these gods provoked the LORD. (Jgs 2:11-19)*

Maybe the Israelites are just trying to fit in. It's hard to be the only nation around that worships a totally unseen God. Just like it's hard to be the only family on the team that chooses church over sports on the Sabbath...the only kid who stands up for a classmate being bullied...the only person in the office who strives to follow God's commands. What are the other "gods" you encounter when you are trying to fit in?

Aug 20: *Gideon said, "If the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us?" "The LORD said, "Go with the strength you have and save Israel from the power of Midian.... "I shall be with you," the LORD said to him. (Jgs 6:11-24)*

Israel is in a state of extreme poverty having been overrun by enemies. The Lord comes to Gideon who questions God as to why this has happened. God doesn't answer him, but gives him the task of saving Israel. When hardships befall us, our first question is often, "Why?" God doesn't usually answer, at least not directly. We are wise to listen to God's directive and assurance to Gideon: go...move forward...with whatever strength you have... "I shall be with you." If you are struggling, think about God saying these words to you.

Aug 21: *"Once the trees went to anoint a king over themselves..." (Jgs 9:6-15)*

This parable from the Book of Judges is lengthy and confusing if you don't have the context. The Israelites, again perhaps trying to fit in, demand a king even though the wisdom figures have advised against it. These early prophets are represented by the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine in the parable who refuse the role of king. So what are they left with? The buckthorn—in this case, Abimelech, whose mother is a Canaanite slave; who has just committed fratricide, killing 70 of his brothers, and has only his own desire for power in mind. To quote scholar Robert Alter, *"only a nasty and unproductive type (the buckthorn) would aspire to the power of a king."* Hmmh. The lesson for the Israelites, and for us, is to realize that human leaders can and sometimes do steer us away from our allegiance to God. Yes, there are leaders like King David, *"a man after God's own heart"* (1 Sm 13), but we are advised *"not to put our trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot save."* (Ps 146) In these days of political turmoil and strife, let's make sure our faith and trust remains in our Servant King, Jesus.

Aug 22: *Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you deliver the Ammonites into my power, whoever comes out of the doors of my house when I return in triumph I shall offer up as a burnt offering." (Jgs 11:29-39).*

This is a disturbing story. Jephthah makes a rash vow to God in exchange for victory in battle, then has to violate Mosaic Law by sacrificing his only child to fulfill his promise. God didn't demand the vow, yet the story ends with the girl's demise. Is there anything we can learn from this sad tale? Most of us, at some point, bargain with God. Maybe it's for health, or perhaps for our own success or glory. But it's wise to pray only for the acceptance of God's will and gratitude for what is given. God does not demand much more than that.

Aug 23: *"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." (Mt 22:34-40)*

I wonder if we are not unlike the Pharisees who come and test Jesus with all our doctrines and rules and rituals. We make things so complex because we desire control: 'the surer I can be about this sin and that grace, the more likely I will get to where I want to go.' Jesus says three things plainly: Love God with your whole being, love your neighbor, and love yourself. And when you think about it, we really can't fulfill the first commandment unless we are able to fulfill the second. It is what God calls us to do, what God wills for us: peace and happiness and joy for ourselves and for each other. The whole law and all the wisdom that has been written comes down to that. We have only to carry it out.

Aug 24: *Jesus saw Nathanael and said of him, "Here is a true child of Israel. There is no duplicity in him." (Jn 1:45-51)*

I've always thought Jesus was complimenting Nathanael with these words until it dawned on me that Israel—Jacob—was one of the most duplicitous characters in the whole of Hebrew scripture! Was Jesus subtly jabbing Nathanael for his uncharitable comment about Nazareth? I like to think so and that they all had a good laugh! The name Israel means one who struggles with God. So perhaps Jesus is saying that it is in our willingness to admit our struggles, our biases, our assumptions about who or what God is (or where God is from!) that allows us to be open to God revealing even greater things! Don't be afraid to talk to God about your struggles.