

Lenten Devotional Reflection 31 March 2020 (Lent Day 30)

Scripture: Hebrews 11:32- 12:2 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Message

Today, in the Christian calendar, we remember John Donne who died on this day in 1631. John Donne was Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London, from 1621-1631. In the winter of 1623, he suffered a near fatal illness, which may have been a plague sweeping through Europe at the time. As he was recovering, he wrote a series of meditations, one for each day of his illness. The most well-known is Meditation 17. It contains the following famous passage:

'No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.'

The 'bell' he refers to is the bell that was rung when someone died. The Meditation reflects on the inter-connectedness of us all. It is ironic that in an age when we are all virtually and digitally connected to one another through the internet and social media, we forget how physically and spiritually dependent on one another we are - for good or ill.

At least, we did until now.

Once again, a plague has reminded us of how connected to each other we are, whether we like it or not.

Donne, in his Meditation, thinks about the connectedness not simply of the human race, but also of the connectedness that we share through baptism and by being members together of the body of Christ.

In today's passage from Hebrews, the writer is seeking to encourage a group of Christians who had been enthusiastic and committed in the past, but who were now in danger of giving up their faith and falling away.

In chapter 11, he holds up as an example and encouragement those who before the coming of Christ had showed great faith. They had suffered for their faith just as some of those he is writing to were suffering for theirs. They should take strength, he writes, from the example of those who endured and demonstrated faith in the past. He concludes by writing:

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely ...' (Hebrews 12:1)

We are surrounded – present tense. For, as Christians, we are not just connected to each other here on earth, but to a far greater number that we cannot see who have run the race before us and who did not give up but endured to the end. They are like a crowd at the Olympics watching us and cheering us on.

In the Eucharist, we say in the introduction to the Sanctus:

*'Therefore with angels and archangels,
and with all the company of heaven,
we proclaim your great and glorious name,
for ever praising you and saying ...'*

We are not alone.

We are people who believe in the 'communion of saints'. We do not only have the prayers and support of each other in Christ, but the whole company of heaven including the saints of the Church who have gone before us.

Saints like Saints Perpetua and Felicity who we remembered at the beginning of Lent. They were young women who, rather than give up their faith, chose to be separated from their newborn babies and thrown to the wild beasts in front of a crowd cheering not in encouragement, but for their death.

Later in chapter 12, the writer tells those he is writing to:

'In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.'
(Hebrews 12:4)

And nor have we.

For the biggest danger facing us today as Christians is not the coronavirus, terrible though it is, but the sin that clings so closely to each one of us. The sin that infects us like a virus and which we are all too complacent about.

Ash Wednesday reminded us of our mortality: *'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.'* We were also urged: *'Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.'*

God in his mercy has given us each other to help us in our struggle against sin. He has also given us the saints who have gone before both as examples and companions on our journey.

So, let us too run with 'perseverance the race that is set before us' and, like the saints who accompany us, look to Jesus, the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith'. And may we like the saints be faithful unto death that we too may finish the race and receive the prize that is ours in Christ.

Meditation

1. Who in the present is an encouragement to me in my journey of faith?
2. Which saints do I especially look to as an example of faith and for inspiration.
3. What sin is clinging particularly closely to me at the moment and what do I need to do to lay it aside?

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