

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV

This Sunday in our tradition is when we celebrate The Feast of All Saints, which is actually the first day of November. The verse cited comes from the Letter to the Hebrews where the writer makes a number of detailed arguments to folk who were considering abandoning their Christian faith because it wasn't easy for them, and their religion was grounded in faith rather than observable religious ceremonies and customs.

These particular verses are the summation of the previous chapter which tells of many of the Old Testament heroes who kept the faith in spite of circumstances. He calls them a part of a “cloud of witnesses” which surrounds those he is writing to, to encourage them through the witness of their ancestors' faith.

All Saints Sunday is a specific opportunity for us to take time to “recharge” our faith by remembering those folk whose Christian example (our cloud of witnesses) in our lives “taught” us the faith, or who through their life witness caused the faith to be “caught” by us.

This does not mean they were “perfect” people, no one really is. But as their witness or example intersected with our lives, they really made a positive impact.

I know that I thank God for the Christian witness in my life through my parents, other family, friends and religious clergy folk. Moreover I thank God for having served as a pastor where I have seen the example of many parishioners whose witness inspired me and are now with the Lord. Sometimes, I have sung at funeral services a song “The King is Coming”. While the song really speaks about Christ's return, it has always spoken to me about a believer's entrance into heaven, especially if the end of their life was not easy.

When I have sung that song at two of the churches I served, there was a balcony in back. As I sang I would picture all those saints I have known over the years watching from that balcony (I have to admit it gets to me when I imagine it now, since I have been in ministry for 26 years, the crowd in the balcony keeps getting larger with the passage of time) with joy on their faces that their witness is rewarded with eternity with the Lord.

Here at St. James, which has had a continuing ministry to this community for 260 years, imagine all those ‘saints’ who have borne witness to Jesus in service to the church and as examples to their family and parishioners. Yes they are a part of our “cloud “of witnesses. Can you imagine them looking down from our balcony?

So let the occasion of All Saints be an opportunity for you by the Holy Spirit to remember, give thanks to God, be inspired and renewed in your by your “great cloud of witnesses”

Pastor John Van Haneghan