

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15, Year C
August 15, 2010

A CLOUD OF WITNESSES (Hebrews 12:1-7, 11-14)
Howard Bowlin+

One of my favorite movies of a few years ago was *The Queen*, starring the Oscar-winning actress, Helen Mirren (who, in my estimation, makes a better queen than the real one). If you haven't seen it, the movie tells the story of the British royal family's reaction to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The story also concerns Tony Blair's first weeks as Prime Minister, and how the two stories intersect.

There is a scene in the movie where Blair finally convinces Queen Elizabeth that she must make some sort of statement about Diana's death. Blair so much as tells Elizabeth and Philip that if they don't act quickly, the monarchy will be permanently compromised. "The People," you see, loved the princess and are outraged by the silence coming from Buckingham Palace.

So, Elizabeth makes a trip to the palace gates where "commoners" have been bringing flowers and laying them outside the fence. Elizabeth walks along the fence looking at the flowers. The camera pans back, further and further, and we see Elizabeth facing a veritable sea of flowers—all expressions of the grief of the people at this one person's death.

Some deaths do seem to affect huge numbers of people. Everyone that I know who is of a certain age or older can tell you exactly where they were when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. (I was dozing off once again in Mr. Heinecke's American History class at Collinsville Senior High School.) Whether we see these public people as heroes or otherwise important may be in the eyes of the beholder. But they do make an impact on a great multitude of people.

But there is another kind of "hero," if you will. These are the heroes of the faith—and our epistle reading for this morning reminds us of this fact.

I want to back up a few verses in the Letter to the Hebrews and read to you some important words that immediately precede our appointed reading: "By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

"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—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 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—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.”¹

One commentator on these verses has observed: “Today’s reading from the letter to the Hebrews is about a different sort of hero: heroes of the faith. ‘Faith,’ says the author in those celebrated words, ‘is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ Then he goes on to name the people who, for him, occupy a place in faith’s hall of fame. There’s Abel and Enoch, Noah and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There’s Moses, who led the people through the Red Sea to freedom; and even Rahab, a woman of a foreign culture (and of doubtful reputation), who saved the spies of Israel from those who would have taken their lives.

“Reading the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, we get the impression that faith’s hall of fame contains more members than anyone could number. When we get to the lists at the end of the chapter—when the author seems to run out of names, and begins simply to recite the deeds of those who were persecuted and beaten, who stood fast despite mocking, torture, or imprisonment—then we realize that heroes of the faith have been with us in every generation.”²

It is only then that we are ready to hear the words that begin our appointed reading: “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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . .” “A great cloud of witnesses” – that’s all those people whom he mentioned earlier. That’s all those people who have gone before us – both as individuals, as well as those who preceded us here at St. Thomas.

Knowing this helps us to understand that we today are part of the “big picture.” We are the latest in a long line of witnesses to the glory of God and his son, Jesus Christ. We are part of the whole. Georges Florovsky, an Eastern Orthodox scholar, has written: “Christianity entered human history as a new social order or, rather, a new social dimension. From the very beginning, Christianity was not primarily a ‘doctrine,’ but exactly a ‘community.’ There was not only a ‘message’ to be proclaimed and delivered and ‘good news’ to be declared, but there was, precisely, a new community, distinct and peculiar, in the process of growth and formation, to which members were called and recruited. Indeed, ‘fellowship’ (*koinonia*) was the basic category of Christian existence.”³

“‘Why do I need to learn history?’ asks the naive schoolchild, fed up with so many dates to memorize. ‘What good will it do me? Will it help me find a job?’ Yet, as a wise person has remarked, ‘those who ignore the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them.’ Like the short-sighted schoolchild, there are some who imagine they can pursue faith without the church: that they can cultivate a purely individual Christianity, quite apart from any community of fellow-travelers.

“The lesson of history is that this can never be so. Faith apart from the church is impossible, a contradiction in terms. We Christians are called to community, but not just any community, the community of those who share a common story.

¹Hebrews 11:29-40.

²Carlos Wilton, *Lectionary Preaching Workbook, Series VIII, Cycle C* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 2006), 278.

³Georges Florovsky, “Empire and Desert: Antinomies of Christian History,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 4, 1957, 133-159.

“Across many waters the faith has been brought to us. Across many waters—waters of suffering, selfishness, greed, and indifference—we are called to share that faith with [others]. Praise God, we are not called to do it alone, but bear that commission in the company of others, the ‘cloud of witnesses’ of those who have gone before, and who even now travel with us on our Christian journey!”⁴

Every time we gather together to celebrate Holy Communion we say some version of these words: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."⁵

"Christ has died" – that which has gone before.

"Christ is risen" – that which is with us right now.

"Christ will come again" – that which awaits us at some time in the future.

That's *who* we are. That's *where* 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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

⁴*Wilton*, 279.

⁵*Book of Common Prayer*, 363.