

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR C

The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* saw the addressees in danger of apostasy from their Christian faith. This danger was due not to any persecution from outsiders but to a weariness with the demands of Christian life and a growing indifference to the Faith. Weariness with the demands of Catholicism and a growing indifference to the Faith are contemporary problems: making the *Letter to the Hebrews* as much a message of encouragement now as it was when written. What we call “Chapter 11” is a reminder that people of God are on a pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem; it does this by recounting the faith of the ancients, by citing examples of both discipline and disobedience. In short, Chapter 11 is a history of our faith.

We are reminded that it was “by faith the men [and women] of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God” (Heb 11:1-3). Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob “all died in faith ... seeking a heavenly homeland” (Heb 11:13, 16). The faithful – you, others, me – we, like the faithful of old, are strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13). The philosopher and Harvard professor George Santayana had echoed this verse from the *Letter to Hebrews* around 1950 when he said, “The true Christian is in all countries a pilgrim and a stranger.” We are comfortable with characterizing ourselves as a Pilgrim People, but are we equally comfortable thinking ourselves as Strangers to the world?

The Israelites simply knew that God existed. They didn’t have to argue him into existence, concluding like a Scholastic that since everything came from somewhere, then there had to be a God. They didn’t create him, in an artistic vein marveling that behind all beauty must be a Perfect Beauty called God. No, every Israelite was as certain of God’s existence as they were of their own.

The instant we are aware that we exist, we immediately know that we did not bring ourselves into existence: that our origin is from beyond. As soon as we say “I am,” the Originating Divine Self echoes, “So am I.” When we know that we are, we know that God is.

When the Israelites interpreted their life story as a dialogue with God; they came to believe that God had chosen them – out of every other kind of people – to be God’s own People. Then they recorded their human history as a working out of God’s history in time. They wrote how God chose Abraham, how Moses led them from slavery, and how God gave them a Promised Land. They dared to record their failures, their infidelity to God, their grievous sins. Their psalmists prayed and begged and cursed God; their prophets beat them into repentance and forgiveness. For them, God was not an article of faith, but a vivid, urgent fact. Whenever they thought of themselves, they thought of God.

Jesus was a latter-day Israelite. God was a powerful presence in his life, but Jesus also came to know God as Father. The moment he experienced his own self, Jesus experienced himself as God’s Son.

The disciples recognized the same God of the Jews. But Jesus had added the paternal dimension to their experience of God. And by their own experience of Jesus, the disciples recognized yet another dimension of divinity: they knew that when they knew Jesus, they also knew God. The Israelite experience of God had progressed from a distant voice in the desert to God-in-the-flesh living their daily life with them.

You and I are later latter-day Israelites, descendants of Abraham raised from Gentile stones (Mt 3:9). Like the Israelites, we have a minimal awareness of God whenever we become aware of our own self. And we are not religious orphans, not seekers of connection: we have a grand family history. We limit God if we restrict God to our private experience.

How wonderfully expanded would our faith be if we really believed that Abraham was “our father in faith;” that God leads us out of slavery, bounds us on the way to the Promised Land!

How robust our faith would be if we actually praised and begged and lamented God along with the psalmist; if we cringed and were converted at the prophet’s warning!

Imagine how close God would feel to us if we intensely believed, as Jesus did, that God is our Father. And if we experienced the presence of Jesus as God’s real presence, as the disciples did!

Our personal faith has a vast history. It is our family story of life with God over thousands of years across continents. What a shame if we reduced all that to our fleeting private moods and claims. And how that diminishes our own lives.

