

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - AUGUST 29, 2010 - ST. JOHN'S, GOSHEN

Two weeks ago, we heard the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews refer to the great figures of the history of Israel as a “cloud of witnesses” that surround us, and which we ourselves could expand to include the great figures of our Christian history, down to grandparents and parents, down to the generation that led us to faith and love of God. Today’s reading ends the same chapter and this time looks forward, looks toward the future, the complete gathering of God’s people in the Kingdom, at the end.

A contrast is drawn with the circumstances of the sealing of the old covenant between God and Israel. Then it was a visible and tangible mountain, Mt. Sinai; there was fire and smoke and noise and a frightening voice—the classic symbols of a theophany, an appearance of God. But what we Christians face when we approach God now is a festival gathering in a new Jerusalem, and we will be surrounded by the angels and by the spirits of those who have been made perfect before us, and we will have confidence because the blood of Christ has brought us forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

This is where we live our Christian lives, between past and future, between memory and hope. Philosophers and psychologists have spoken of individuals locating their identities between past and future: who we are being defined by where we’ve been and by where we wish to go. Amnesia means a loss of identity—no self possible because no future possible because no past is remembered. A similar analysis can be applied to groups, to communities, which arise and hold together because of a common remembered past and a common anticipated future. Think of how we introduce new citizens into the story of America. Think of how new Christians are introduced into the sacred history we remember and celebrate each week. Think of how our creed ends with what we await in hope: we expect the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

This location between memory and hope also defines what we do in the holy mysteries we celebrate. St. Thomas Aquinas said that the sacraments have threefold sign-value, symbolism. They are commemorative signs, recalling to mind what God has done for us in Christ. They are anticipatory signs, looking forward to the eternal banquet of the Kingdom. And they are signs of the grace already present among us, of the fellowship in grace already enjoyed. St. Thomas not only wrote beautifully about this in his great theological work. He also wrote of it poetically in the beautiful verses of a hymn: “*O sacrum convivium, in quo Christus sumitur, recolitur memoria passionis ejus, mens impletur gratia, and futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur.*” [O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given us.]

Who we are individually is defined by what we remember and what we hope for. Each present moment of our lives is poised between what we have been and what we may become. If faith is the great virtue that keeps us anchored in what God has done for us, and hope is the great virtue that keeps our hearts and minds on what he has promised, love should be the great virtue by which the power of the past and the promise of the future enable a life lived generously, in imitation of Christ and all the great saints and anticipating the reconciled community in the great and joyful feast God has prepared for those who love him.