

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Feb 5th 2013

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.

Is this a reference to our faith? The translators of the King James Version and the NIV and the NRSV thought so, for they add our here—“the author and finisher [or perfecter] of our faith.” But the writer to the Hebrews (apparently Jewish Christians) has just spent a long, full chapter celebrating the Old Testament heroes of faith, the “great crowd of witnesses,” people like Abraham and Moses whose trust in the unseen God enabled them to act courageously. The part that we read as our first reading today climaxes that string of examples of faith with the perfect example of Jesus’ faith. The faith that Abraham, Moses and the rest demonstrated was perfected in the faith of Jesus in his embrace of the shameful death of Roman execution by crucifixion. That is precisely what the rest of the reading spells out:

For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God.

Jesus could enter that terrible death and denigration because of his trust in the Father’s ultimate rescue (“the joy that lay before him”). Jesus’ profound exercise of his human faith gave faith a new dimension. Because of the resurrection that followed, we now have a new kind of faith in the living God, whom we have learned from Jesus to call “Father.” Through his own life, death, and resurrection Jesus did indeed perfect faith. And so the author goes on to assert that Jesus is the perfect model and facilitator of our faith, too: Consider that he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

So the translators of the KJV and the NRSV had it half right. Jesus is indeed the perfecter of our faith, but he did it by means of the superior exercise of his own human faith. This is the same book of the Bible that insists that Jesus was “similarly tested in all ways, yet without sin” (4:15). Take heart. Jesus taught us to be “co-dependent” on the Father in a way that gives the word co-dependency a positive sense. Jesus enables us to walk in his way of faithfulness to the Father.

Dennis Hamm, S.J.