

4 – BLESSED ARE THE BLESSED

Thursday, 18 July, 2013 - Visit to Sabará



LECTIO / Reading: The Letter to the Hebrews 11, 1-16

1. Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.
2. Because of this the ancients were well attested.
3. By faith we understand that the universe was ordered by the word of God, so that what is visible came into being through the invisible.
4. By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice greater than Cain's. Through this he was attested to be righteous, God bearing witness to his gifts and through this, though dead, he still speaks.
5. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and "he was found no more because God had taken him".
Before he was taken up, he was attested to have pleased God.
6. But without faith it is impossible to please Him for anyone who approaches God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those that seek Him.
7. By faith Noah, warned about what was yet unseen, with reverence built an ark for the salvation of his household. Through this he condemned the world and inherited the righteousness that comes through faith.
8. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance: he went out not knowing where he was to go
9. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise,
10. for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God.
11. By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age - and Sarah herself was sterile - for he thought that the one who made the promise was trustworthy.
12. So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore.
13. All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth,
14. for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland.
15. If they had been thinking of the land from which they had come, they would have had opportunity to return.
16. But now they desire a better homeland, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

MEDITATIO / Explanation and background of the text

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is unknown. Already by the end of the second century, Origen, a father of the Church, wrote that this (authorship) is a puzzle that we can not solve. Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews gives a re-reading of the complete Jewish scripture (the old Testament). The author goes through all the stories known from scripture and beyond, to find proofs for his position that faith gives a solid foundation to life. He is in line with those he called "the ancient ones", the "people of long ago" about whom the Scriptures speak: e.g. Cain and Abel, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Rahab. The author uses the old stories which are known to him. In this way he tries to give a new expression to his own faith. We read a part of this long passage.

In verse 11,3 we find a sentence which sounds very contemporary: through faith we profess that God's word created the universe. With this sentence we do not have to enter into the discussion of creation versus evolution. He who looks with the eyes of faith at the mysteries of the universe can see in it the miracle of creation. That does not negate that life developed through evolution. However, it does emphasize that God's word is the basis of everything and of all life.

All the ancient ones of the old writings mentioned by the author are attributed a specific quality. He says about Abel that through his faith he still speaks to us even after his death. Two things strike us. The first one is that through the story the memory of someone stays alive. You are only dead when people forget you and do not speak about you anymore. As long as the story is told throughout the centuries, your name will be alive in the community. The second one is that the author shows how he reads the Jewish scriptures (Old testament) with Christian eyes. He writes: even after his death, he (Abel) continues to speak to us. This reflects the resurrection faith of the author. This vision returns at the reference to the sacrifice of Abraham (this is found outside our opening text) in 11,19: Abraham was convinced that God has the power to raise the dead to life. We find a number of such sentences about Abraham, as if the author did his best to typify the ancient ones.

In the story of Noah, faith is like an ark through which one gains justification. It will save one from the downfall. We also find this kind of insight in the story of Enoch (11,66), which shows what kind of milieu the author lives in (the sentence could also be found in John). He who wants to reach God, must believe in Him, and He only rewards those that seek Him. In the story of Abraham we read the following interesting sentence: He (Abraham) looked forward to the city with foundations of which God is the designer and builder. In the New Testament much attention is given to Abraham. Here too, the author refers explicitly to the story of Abraham. This focus demonstrates how important Abraham is for the proclaimers of the New Testament.

St. Paul too goes back to the stories of Abraham to illustrate what position he defends. In the letter to the Hebrews, Abraham is the example for all who want to believe: they are called strangers and guests. In his path, also the other patriarchs (Isaac and Jacob) follow, but the letter to the Hebrews pays less attention to them. The image of being a stranger was an important image for the early Christians. They used this image to show that they were not attached to this world or a worldly life. For this reason, the author of the Letter to the

Hebrews wrote down that they lived in tents: this world is not a permanent home. Fittingly is the image of the heavenly Jerusalem (not a worldly Jerusalem; the object of so much fighting in the past and the present). The opening sentence is a summary of the position of the author of this letter. Verses 13 through 16 constitute a second summary, which connects with the opening sentence: they died without receiving. To believe without having seen (not seeing, yet believing) is in one way or another the refrain that keeps coming back. Something special is added at the end. God does not want that they would reach their conclusion without us. That thought can go two ways. God does not only take along all previous generations in the fulfillment but also future generations. The author of the letter answers the question as following: why not now, why not us? No, there is life in the future. They too have their life span. God wants to take them along to the fulfillment. Something remarkable is found in Enoch. Enoch did not die and God took him up. He is the Invisible, for Enoch did good in the eyes of God. This is a clear signal for the reader: doing good leads to seeing God. In the meantime, we realize the glasses through which the author sees the world. Everything is colored by the experience of Christ Jesus. In conclusion, he presents this to the readers: because of their faith we still speak about them. They kept their faith in spite of what happened to them. God made them a promise to which they clung.

Notes

CONTEMPLATIO / reflection

We are part of a centuries old tradition of predecessors who presented us the faith - and the works of faith, and who were ambassadors of a worldwide brotherhood which is called church. The letter to the Hebrews reflects back on an old tradition of about 2000 years. We now live again 2000 years *after* this letter. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews has put his contemporary readers already in an old tradition. We, who read this first century letter, look back on a yet much longer history. We are now permitted to stand in a line of the many people from scripture and in a row of many saints. The "blessed ones": that is how they are called if you translate the latin word "*beati*" more precisely. Many among us have a name that connects us with one of the people in scripture or with a saint.

It can be interesting to research with whom your name is connected, and what this person has to tell you today. For all of these ancestors in faith tell us their story from across the border of death and they present us what was central to their life, namely the pledge that faith will give you throughout your life.

By re-reading all of scripture, the letter to the Hebrews shows us that we, in our faith, and in our searching and questioning, may build on our ancestors in faith. How often do we see a statue of a saint in our homes? A statue of Mary or a statue of a saint with whom we feel more comfortable. Those statues give us a special feeling, namely that we are never alone. We believe God is always nearby. However, we should also know ourselves to be surrounded by the saints. Those saints make visible that our faith gives certainty. That it pays off to be steadfast. Faith provides certainty on how to give direction to our lives, to do good like Enoch did. Saints and predecessors pass along that faith is primarily trusting, trusting in God, trusting in His promise. It is a deep trust that we have, when we do not see the heavenly city, we may trust Him like the many before us. The promise which is also given to us, is that we will reach the fulfillment. It brings satisfaction to reflect on each story about the people of ancient times in the Letter to the Hebrews. It deals with the stories of Cain and Abel, with Enoch with Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Sarah. Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Baruch, Samson, Samuel, David and the prophets.

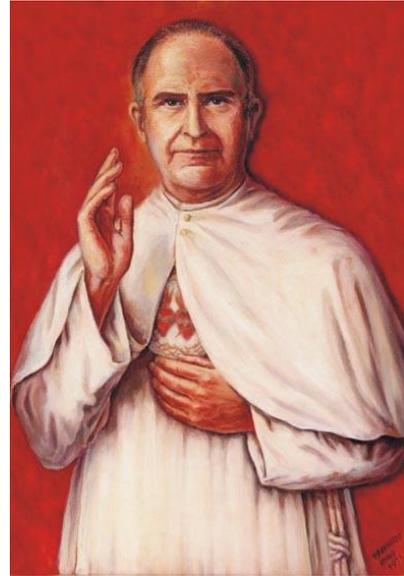
It would take too long to study those stories separately here. We chose two other stories for our reflection. In line with the Letter to the Hebrews, in the following pages we will dwell on two persons in the long line of our faith ancestors, two blessed ones (*beati*). They are the blessed Eustachius van Lieshout, and saint Vincent de Paul.

1. Blessed Eustachius van Lieshout SSCC

Father Eustachius was born in Aarle-Rixel, a village in North Brabant in the Netherlands, on November 3, 1890. He was born in a farmer's family of 11 children. Already at an early age, he wanted to become a missionary, following the example of Saint Damian de Veuster.

Damian de Veuster was a member of the fathers of the Sacred Heart (SSCC) and until his death he worked among the lepers in Hawaii. Eustachius received his training with the fathers of the Sacred Heart. He entered their order in 1915 and was ordained a priest in 1919. In 1925, after a few years of pastoral parish work in the Netherlands, he went to Brazil. Here he worked in several parishes. He supported many people through the blessings of his good works, and through his prayers, people were healed. For this reason he became well known throughout all of Brazil. Thousands of people wanted to meet him every day.

However, this made the normal parish work nearly impossible for him. Consequently, he often went to a different place or he sought for quiet places. In 1942, Father Eustachius became a building pastor in a poor neighborhood in Belo Horizonte. He was infected with spotted fever due to an insect bite. He died on April 30, 1943. People came and continue to come to pray at his grave. Father Eustachius was declared blessed in Belo Horizonte on June 15th, 2006.



The slogan of Father Eustachius was: health and peace. Through his efforts and faith, Father Eustachius has shown what a Christian is able to do. He is an example for us to dedicate ourselves to our fellowmen and always pray for them. He gave himself no break when he could lessen the suffering of his neighbor. He wanted to be an instrument of God in everything. As a missionary, he was a witness to the merciful love of God for the poor and the sick. For him, the physical healing was an obviously clear sign of the healing of the soul. For example: he wrote that the people were healed of apathy and tepidity, and that this healing brought them to faith in God. They saw that the story of Christ continues.

2. Saint Vincent de Paul

Along with Our Lady, saint Vincent de Paul is the patron saint of the congregation CMM. Vincent de Paul was born in 1581 in a city that was named after him since 1828. In 1600, he was ordained a priest. This way, he planned to make a career in France. In 1605, he was captured by pirates, and as a result ended up in Tunis as a slave. He managed to escape in 1607. He returned to France and studied in Rome for a few years. Then he entered into service of the Gondee family in Paris. Through their efforts he became a priest in Clichy in 1612. Here, the story of his conversion started.



On a certain Sunday, he learned about a sick family which had nothing to eat. He could not stop preaching about it. To better structure the support of the poor, he founded a women's organization dedicated to the poor and sick. Since that time, he dedicated himself more and more to people living at the seamy side of life. In 1619 he became head chaplain of the galley slaves. He gave it his utmost to improve their fate, wherever possible. He also travelled from parish to parish - for three day retreats - to help the faithful put their religious life in order. He also dedicated himself to the improvement of the education of the clergy. To realize this, he founded the Congregation of the Mission, also called Lazarists, in 1625. Finally, together with Louise de Marillac, he founded the congregation of the Daughters of Charity in 1633. This way, he was able to realize his commitment to the poor. He died in Paris on September 27, 1660. The following two quotes characterize him: "The street is your convent, the sickroom your cell" and "sometimes you have to leave Christ for Christ; sometimes you have to leave your prayers in order to serve Christ in the sick".

We are in the tradition of saint Vincent de Paul. May his care for the poor be our care. By following his example we are able to actually and practically follow Christ in whom we believe. The world is waiting for us.

Notes

We interrupt for a moment. Someone read the bible passage one more time out loud.

Now let us remain silent for a while to allow these thoughts to enter into our minds and hearts. The time of silence may vary, about 10 minutes.

COLLATIO / sharing

We all sit together as one group or in smaller groups. We enter into a conversation about the bible passage and the meditation and share the insights we have gained. What strikes you?, what bothers you?, what does it stir in you?, how does the passage challenge you?, You can discuss this by using the following questions:

- We talked about two saints. What struck you? Where did you have misgivings? Do you also have (another) favorite saint?
- Share with others what appeals to you in your favorite saint.
- You have a site in the long line of the faithful. How does that strengthen your faith?

Notes

ORATIO / prayer

We conclude our session with a prayer. We may pray spontaneously or we may use a standard prayer that connects with the contents of our discussion. Words, images and motives from the bible quotation and the reflection may be used in that prayer.

An example of such a prayer:

Invisible God

You are not ashamed to be our God.

You build a city for us

in which we may live with all who went before us in faith.

We trust your word.

Through your word all came into being.

On your word we build our lives.

Teach us to persevere, even when people slander us.

Teach us to keep doing good , even when we are ridiculed.

This we ask of You through Jesus Christ through whom we praise you.

Amen