

August 11, 2019 The Faith of Abraham Homily: The “Letter to the Hebrews” in its great eulogy of the faith of Israel’s ancestors, lays special emphasis on Abraham’s faith: “By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith, he lived as a stranger and pilgrim in the promised land”. (Catechism of the Catholic Church #145)

In view of today’s passage from the Letter to the Hebrews (11:1-2, 8-11), I am reminded of a popular game of years gone by: Pin the Tail on the donkey. A description may help. A picture of a donkey with a missing tail is tacked onto a wall. A child is blindfolded, handed a paper tail and given instructions to pin the tail on the donkey. He is then spun around until he is disoriented. On one level, the game involves some risk for the one blindfolded. He may stumble and fall; or he may bump into a sharp object, thereby risking injury. Seeing the child with no sense of direction stumble about can seem quite amusing. And much to the delight of his companions, he is likely to be embarrassed. It is often left to the other players of the game to set him on the right path to the donkey. His friends must be trustworthy.

The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is a hymn to faith. In Jewish tradition it was with Abraham that faith in the distant future was first given, along with hope founded in God’s promise. The three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all revere the patriarch as a man specially chosen by the Almighty for a specific mission. The faith and trust Abraham placed in God, leaving his family and homeland behind, suggests a risk the patriarch was willing to accept. Only a profound trust could move anyone to take such a leap into the unknown. Abraham had never seen his goal, but he had God’s word that it existed and that it would one day be in his possession. He was a prototype of our pilgrimage toward heaven, a land unseen and unknown to us, but in whose existence we have grounds for confidence, with an assurance that one day it will be ours. The author of the letter to the Hebrews sees the wandering and exiled patriarchs as figures of our exile from the heavenly country. “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come”. (Heb. 13-14)

In his reflections on this reading, the Protestant biblical scholar, William Barclay, points out that “if faith does not involve risks, it is not faith. If faith can see every step of the way, it is not faith. The person of faith has to go out not knowing where he is going.” Even in the most hopeless of situations the believer must place his trust in God’s Word.

We are like pilgrims in a foreign land as long as we are on earth. The Christian people of God are on pilgrimage to the final place of rest. Life has a destination. We are bound for glory!

The English writer G.K. Chesterton (d.1936) was notoriously absent-minded. As a passenger on a train, he was once approached by the conductor for his ticket. Chesterton began fishing for his ticket but was unsuccessful in finding it. He became quite agitated. Noting Chesterton’s distress, the conductor attempted to calm him. “There is no need to be upset, Mr. Chesterton”, he said. “Just send us the ticket once you have found it.” Chesterton replied, “You fail to understand, sir, that I am a passenger on this train, and I don’t know where I am going”.

Life offers us many challenges. It often seems that we are blindfolded, and are walking aimlessly, with no particular destination in mind. As our father in faith, Abraham has set a wonderful example for us. His trust in God is inspiring.

Abraham, our father in faith, pray for us.

Amen!