

“Standing on the Shoulders of the Ancestors”

Sirach 44:1-15 Revelation 21:1-6

Scott B. Martin - November 1, 2009

This past July I spent a few days in southern Ontario working on my family genealogy. In the process I discovered the name of the ancestor on my mother's side, George Burgess, who joined the Hudson Bay Company and traveled to the shores of Hudson Bay and became a factor in a fur trading post. While there I even found a long lost fourth cousin who had a sofa that George Burgess brought down by canoe from Hudson Bay to the shores of Lake St. Claire 200 years ago when he retired from the Hudson Bay Company. Sitting on this sofa with my fourth cousin and his wife I couldn't help but feel an odd sense of connection not only to this cousin I had never met but to my great, great, great grandfather, whose name I had only just learned.

If he had drowned on the ship from the Orkney Islands to Hudson Bay I literally wouldn't be here today. If he had died of a fever as a young boy I wouldn't be here today. If he had frozen to death that first winter, I wouldn't be here today. I wouldn't be here and neither would any of my immediate relatives from me back to him! One break in our ancestral tree and none of us would be here today! Today on All Saints Day, of all days, we need to recognize that we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors.

This is literally true when it comes to our genetic birthright and even our very birth into this world. It is also true in less concrete and literal ways. Our lives have not only been influenced by our blood relatives but also by teachers, Sunday School teachers, friends, colleagues, employers, good

neighbors, friends, even strangers that either cross our paths or that of other people or organizations that influence us and the world around us.

The Christian Church, the Body of Christ is now an over 2,000 year old project, a 4 or 5,000 year old project if you add in the Jewish foundation of our faith. Imagine for a moment the tens of millions of people through the millennia that have helped make it possible for us to be sitting here this morning praising God! The goal of this multi-thousand year project is to create a community of people who seek to love God and neighbor as themselves. This effort has had many ups and downs, but here we are this morning carrying on this project as best we can for ourselves and for future generations.

Joan Chittister writes, **“One look around the Western World and it is clear that we have lost what people need most and will create out of nothing, if necessary: a sense of spiritual substance and holy sacrifice, long-suffering endurance and eternal fidelity. The very stuff of people like ourselves who have lived through the mundane and survived it, lived through tragedy and bettered it, lived through the immoral and righted it. We need a new sense of the saints before, the saints around us, the saint within us, and the saints yet to come who will look to us for proof of the power of the holy.”**

The Book of Sirach start off singing the praises of “famous” people. We do the same today. These are the people who have multimillion dollar foundations and educational and civic buildings named after them. These are the kind of people who have statues and plaques placed in their honor. These are the people you read about in the history books. As Sirach says, **“all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times. Some of them left behind a name, so that others declare their**

praise. (44:7-8) In religious terms these are the folks we read about in the bible and famous men and women of faith since; like Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King and countless more. Such people do indeed still inspire us today in our own quests to be saints of God.

Sirach raises an interesting question. “Do we have to be famous to be remembered, to leave a legacy when we are gone?” **“But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them.”** (44:9) Walk through any cemetery and look at the hundreds of graves. How many are remembered by the world at large or even by their families? It would indeed seem to be the case that unless one made some kind of indelible mark on the world such as in music, literature, the military, politics, philanthropy, etc. the world forgets who we were.

The world may well forget the names of all but the most famous but this does not mean these nameless saints will not have a legacy, testifies Sirach. **“But these were GODLY [people], whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children’s children.”** (44:10-11) The key word in this testimony is that these were GODLY people. They were saints of God. By their godly lives they helped preserve the faith that was passed on to them by their godly ancestors. Through their godly lives they passed on the faith to their children and their children’s children.

I believe that Sirach is talking about more than these saints’ bloodline children and grandchildren. I say this because of the example given. Sirach says, **“Their descendants stand by the covenants; their children also, for their sake. ... The assembly declares their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise.”** (44:12, 15) Sirach says that by our

gathering here this morning to remember and praise God we are carrying on the legacy of the saints who have gone before us. In so doing we not only honor God but their godly lives by carrying on their work. The very community of faith, the living saints today is a testimony to the saints of old who in their generation did all they could to preserve the community of faith and extend it to others.

The service today will conclude with a celebration of holy communion. While one can receive communion when apart from the community of faith, in a hospital or a prison, or in a sickbed at home, it is none-the-less essentially a communal act, a celebration of the community of saints, either gathered or scattered. In either case it is God that is the “tie that binds.” This being All Saints Day we would do well to meditate on the dimension of communion that binds us not only to those present but also to the saints past and future. Again, it is God that is the tie that binds.

A final thought from Joan Chittister, **“Belief in the communion of saints is a call to immersion in the holy-making project of living out the life of Christ ourselves as so many have done before us. Strengthened by the model of the One ‘in whose memory’ we make Eucharist – this thanksgiving for everything that is – we are bound to all it implies: We are bound to the unfinished work of bring the world to the beatitudes. And we are bound, as well, to those who, in a special way, have modeled it before us and shown it to be worthwhile.”**

May we give thanks for the saints known and unknown for passing on the faith we hold today. We stand on the shoulders of past saints this morning. By the grace of God may future saints say the same of us. Amen.