

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19; 19th Sunday of OT

August 10, 2025, Year C

Good evening, everyone. This weekend the Church gives us a passage from one of the great treasures of the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews. The Letter to the Hebrews is unique in many ways and is one that I personally find fascinating, particularly because it has some of the most memorable and eloquent language found anywhere in Sacred Scripture. The readings we are given for the Mass are usually brief selections from the text, which emphasize a particular theme but can make it difficult to get an overall understanding of what is being said in the entire letter. Since we, as a Church, will be reading from the Letter to the Hebrews for the next few Sundays, I thought that it would be helpful to take an overall look at this deeply profound letter to see what message it had to its audience in the first century and to see what this letter might have to say to us today.

One of the things that makes the Letter to the Hebrews distinct is that it isn't written as you would normally expect an ancient letter to be written; it lacks some of the formal features normally found in an ancient letter such as an introduction by the author accompanied by an opening word of thanksgiving. In fact, neither the author nor the recipients are named in the text. As far as the author goes, there has been much debate down through the history of the Church over who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews. The gist of the controversy has been about whether St. Paul wrote the letter or not. There are many similarities in expression and theology between Hebrews and Paul's other letters, but the different, more polished, style of Greek and the unique subject matter, along with the fact that Paul does not identify himself as the writer, as he does in his other letters, points to the likelihood of there being another unnamed author, who was obviously well acquainted with Paul's ideas and teachings.

The Letter to the Hebrews also does not identify the recipients nor the community's location. The title "To the Hebrews" was added as early as the second century. We know what we know about the recipients from what is mentioned about them in the text and from the subject matter of the letter. We know they were Christians of Jewish origin who were familiar with the Old Testament because the author makes numerous Old Testament citations, so he expected his readers to know them. They knew about the temple and the ceremonies held there. They had received catechesis in the Christian Faith, and some may have even been teachers of the Faith. They have endured hardships and suffering for their faith. We also know they are struggling spiritually. They have become "*dull in hearing*" (5:11) that leads to disobedience and the loss of faith. They are neglecting to meet regularly (10:25). They are developing "*drooping hands and weak knees*" (12:12) and are in danger of abandoning their faith and turning back to Judaism.

It is to this audience that the author of Hebrews makes his argument and his exhortation. His argument is one that shows the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old, not so much in an adversarial way, but in a way that shows the New Covenant as the fulfillment and perfection of the old. The critical core of this argument is the uniqueness and exceptionality of Jesus Christ, who He is, and what He has done. The opening passage reads like a prologue to the letter and provides the essentials of the argument (1:1-4). These first four verses tell us who Jesus is: He is the Son, the appointed heir of all things, through whom the world was created. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. This passage also tells us what he did. He made purification for sins; He went to the Cross in obedience and love for His Father and for love of us, and through his Resurrection and Ascension, he is now seated at the right hand of the Father on high where He reigns as King of heaven and earth. Our author goes on to highlight the critical importance of Jesus' Passion

and Death saying, *“For it was fitting that He, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.”* (2:10) Jesus’ salvific work, his endurance of suffering and death, leads to His perfection, that is, His being crowned with glory and honor, which has now opened for all the “New Promised Land” of eternal life in heaven. The Paschal Mystery is the key to understanding this letter.

Our Author will use this argument to show that Jesus is superior to Moses, because Moses led Israel on an earthly pilgrimage to an earthly promised land, but Jesus, through His Paschal Sacrifice, leads the New Israel into the heavenly promised land. He shows that the priesthood of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, who is a High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, a priest forever, seated at the throne of the Majesty, who continuously makes intercession for us in the heavenly sanctuary, and whose sacrifice of His own blood was made once and for all. Jesus’ priesthood is infinitely superior to the Levitical priesthood whose High Priests were many because they needed to be continuously replaced when one died and who had to offer daily sacrifices of bulls and goats for their own sins and for those of the people.

As he concludes his letter our author makes a plea to his audience to remain loyal to the gift of salvation they have received in Jesus Christ. He encourages them saying, *“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”* (10:23) This last part of the letter focuses on the virtue of faith and how important it is for our salvation. This is where today’s reading comes in, which begins with a definition of faith as *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* (11:1) Our reading then gives examples of what faith looks like as it highlights the life of Abraham, the great father of the chosen people, and our great father in faith. It is by faith that Abraham obeyed God when he was called to go out from his country and his kindred to inherit a land he didn’t know, believing in God’s promise

that he would make of him a great nation and his name would be great and through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. For many years it looked as if God's promise to Abraham would not be fulfilled as he and Sarah grew old and they had no children, but Sarah believed that God would be faithful to His promise, and by her faith, even though she was well past the age, she conceived and bore a son, the son of the promise, Isaac. The greatest test of Abraham's faith was still to come when God told Abraham He wanted him to sacrifice his son, the son that he had waited and longed for. How could God ask Abraham to sacrifice the one through whom God's promises would be fulfilled? By faith, by Abraham's great faith, he was able to trust in God so completely, that he believed that even if he was to sacrifice Isaac, that God would somehow raise him up again, even from the dead. This is the kind of faith that endures to the end. This is the kind of faith that the Letter to the Hebrews calls its listeners to. This is the kind of faith that we are called to today.

We live in a time that is not so different from this time of the early Church. It is true that the issues facing us today are different from then. We are not tempted to return to Judaism, but we do live in a post-Christian culture, a culture where Christianity is no longer the dominant influence on our society's values, beliefs, and practices. What this means is that it is no longer easy to be a Christian, the culture no longer cares about or encourages a person to have faith. There are some famous national surveys that show over the last twenty years the percentage of American adults that identify as Christian has dropped from 78% down to 63% and the number of "Nones", those that have no religious affiliation at all, has gone up from 16% to 28%. What these numbers practically mean is that there are a lot of people who no longer consider themselves Christian. We can see other similarities between now and then. They were struggling spiritually; we call ourselves spiritual – but not religious. They have become "*dull in*

hearing” (5:11) that leads to disobedience and the loss of faith. We are surrounded by noise and distractions that make it hard to hear the voice of God, which make it very hard to pray. They are neglecting to meet regularly (10:25). Again, we have many distractions and alternative options for things to do on Sundays, and it is easy to find excuses not to go to Mass. They are developing “*drooping hands and weak knees*” and are in danger of abandoning their faith and turning back to Judaism. We are in danger of abandoning the Faith of our fathers and becoming “Nones.” I know this sounds depressing, and I don’t want to leave us without hope because as Catholics we are people of hope and there are signs of great hope. Those trend lines regarding religious affiliation appear to be bottoming out; over the last five years they have held constant, that means things are not getting worse, and some analysts are saying it is because of young adults, those who belong to “Gen Z”, these young people are rediscovering faith. If these experts are right, this is great news. I believe we can see evidence of this in our parish with all the young people here for the summer in Church and in the Chapel, as well as all of the young families we see at Mass. What can we do to build on this great news? We can listen to the exhortation in the Letter to the Hebrews and start by praying for an increase in faith for all of us. We can pray for the faith that kept God’s promise alive through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; all the way down to us today. We can pray for the faith that Jesus held onto as He went to the Cross, that whatever happened, His Father could raise him up, even from the dead. Faith is a supernatural gift from God, but it also requires a response to God’s grace, so we need to pray for both the gift and the courage to respond to that gift. The key to understanding the Letter to the Hebrews is to recognize the incredible gift of salvation we have been given in Jesus’ Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. Jesus has opened the gates of heaven for us, and in Him and through Him, we are heirs to eternal life. There is no greater gift.