

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Today we are continuing with our sermon series on Hebrews. This week continues the reading of Chapter 11 begun last week.

Many parents have high hopes for their children. Musical toys are given to encourage offspring who start singing in tune before they can talk. Financial sacrifices are made for children showing potential particularly in sports or arts. It would be cynical to think that all this is 'pushy parent syndrome'; mostly it shows the natural pride and delight of parents in the children they love.

God too has high hopes for the children he loves. He delights in our progress, and looks out for the seeds of the gifts he has given us to blossom; he loves to watch us using these gifts for the good of the world. Today we sense God's sadness as he looks for the good in creation, and finds instead destructive selfishness, bloodshed and cries of distress. We all know that aching disappointment of an attempt which has failed, in spite of the lavish care we have invested in it. Sadly we have to recognise that sometimes our behaviour, both collectively and individually, disappoints our loving heavenly Father.

Such behaviour and attitudes are a waste of our life. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews urges us to get rid of everything that hinders and entangles us, so that we can run the race more easily and comfortably. And the best way of doing that is by keeping our sights fixed on Jesus. It is noticeable throughout history that whenever people have done this they have been enabled to bring about great good, both within the Church and in society. It is when their eyes swivel round to fix on other things that corruption, distortion of truth, and injustice start taking over. Our own consumer society and cult of individualism are examples of this. Like bindweed, they can look attractive, but throttle the life out of whatever they climb over. And the roots need to be totally eradicated to prevent strong regrowth. Jesus warns his followers that the path of righting deep-rooted wrong will not be straightforward or without radical disturbance and upheaval, not only in individuals, but also in families and nations and church communities.

The focus of last week's reading was the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Today's text continues Hebrews great description of faith with stories of victory – Moses leading the people through the Red Sea, Joshua and his troops bringing down the walls of Jericho, and so on.

There are casualties, of course, but only among the baddies. But as the passage continues, the outlook for the believers gets bleaker. Suddenly, they are the ones who look like the losers. There is talk of torture and horrible death, of losing homes and possessions, and having to wander in the desert, living like animals and on the edge of madness. What starts as a surging, energising list of victorious heroes for the reader to model themselves on now starts to go horribly wrong.

‘Hang on,’ we can hear the reader saying. ‘This isn’t what I joined up for. You never said faith would lead to all this trouble.’

‘But I thought you would have taken that for granted,’ the author replies, in bewilderment. ‘You do know what happened to the founder, Jesus, don’t you? You can’t possibly have missed the fact that he died a horrible death?’

‘So what are we doing here, then?’ the reader demands.

‘You are doing what all our ancestors and our Lord himself did,’ the author replies, patiently. ‘You are living by faith. And that means that your story is partly for other people, not just for yourself.’

Throughout chapter 11, Hebrews is telling the story of faith from a long term viewpoint. The individual actors all have some idea that their lives are part of a bigger story and now, Hebrews is reminding us, it is our turn. Like all the great parade of heroes of faith, we have to be prepared to relinquish centre stage, and to see our lives as an episode in the great unfolding plot. That doesn’t make us insignificant, any more than Abraham and Moses are insignificant, but it does change the perspective. We are not taking part in an individual sprint, but a relay race, where our job is to run and then pass the baton on safely. Because that is the only way to win the race.

The people mentioned in the epistle shared the stress of keeping faith before God’s promise was fulfilled. Remarkable faith was not rewarded instantly with blessing. So, while some, by faith, were delivered in extraordinary circumstances, others, also by faith, were tortured, imprisoned, and stoned to death. It is hard to reconcile being mocked, destitute, or sawn in two with the blessings promised in the Old Testament when God’s people were faithful. We cannot measure faith by outcomes that are expressed in terms of human success.

When we choose faith, we step into a story that already has a strong narrative thread and is full of colourful characters. They lend weight and context to our part of the story, which might otherwise be a little thin and uneventful. For the time that we are on stage, we are supported by a wonderful cast of famous actors, who are generously making us look better by their skill. But, of course, this is not a play that we can step in and out of. We cannot take off the costume when the scenes get ugly.

In addition to having so many faithful predecessors this section of Hebrews moves on to the even more inspiring, ground breaking, sacrificial mission of Jesus. He has led the way in making it through, via the cross with its terrible suffering, to the fulfilment of all God promised in the Old Testament. He kept his eye on what his death would accomplish and went for it! Chapter 12 verse 2, 'looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God'.

So the challenge of past martyrs and Jesus himself is for us today to keep on trusting in him and serving in his mission. Such is our calling – in the face of hostility, set back and adversity. No giving up! In Jesus' name, Amen.