

Sermon 2022-08-14

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

Faith in perspective

When I was at theological college I had completed the dreaded preaching module and wasn't particularly looking forward to getting back the marked sermon which was the final task. I was right to be nervous. The sermon came back duly annotated by the lecturer with the words... "this is a really weak point... you are going to have to speak extra loudly at this point".

It is a technique often employed by politicians but also, I think, by the writer to the Hebrews in the passage we heard this morning. The writer begins at a moderate pace, with encouraging examples of faith, and then gradually ratchets up the excitement, and ultimately, no small amount of horror, as the listener is encouraged to run the race in spite of a list of examples outlining where it all seemed to go so horribly wrong.

The background here seems to be that of a fledgling Christian community caught between a rock and a hard place. Their loyalty is questioned by the members of the Jewish synagogues where they originated and they are dismissed by the contemporary culture that surrounded them. It seems that these early followers of Jesus were in need of some steel to stiffen their resolve.

So, how did our writer to the Hebrews set all this out? Well, as we heard, he started out with a list of victories. There was Moses leading the people through the Red Sea; Joshua and his troops bringing down the walls of Jericho; not to mention Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel - the list goes on. There were casualties throughout as well but these were all baddies. Then, as the passage moves on, the outlook for believers gets somewhat bleaker. Suddenly, those believers begin to look like complete losers. Out of nowhere there is now talk of torture and horrible death, of losing homes and possessions, and having to wander in the desert, living like animals. What started as a surging, energising list of victorious heroes for those Hebrews to model themselves on now begins to take on a completely different and disturbing feel.

You can imagine that the narrative might have gone a little like this...

"Hang on," you can hear the reader say. "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 might reply, possibly somewhat bewildered. "You do know what happened to our founder,

Jesus, don't you? Surely, you can't possibly have missed that he died an excruciatingly horrible death?"

"So what are we all doing here, then?" the reader demands.

"You are doing just what all our ancestors and our Lord himself did" the writer replies. "You are living by faith. And that means that your story isn't just for yourself - it's partly for other people."

But this isn't just about the Hebrews back then; it's about us, you and me, today.

This is a story of faith with a long term perspective. Reading this passage today reminds us that, having heard all about those heroes from times past, it is now our turn. We are part of the bigger story. The good news though, is that we are not part of that story on our own. We are part of the story, not just with each other, but also with all those who have gone before us.

The whole story of faith that Hebrews has been telling both last week and today takes it for granted that, as it says in verse 40 from today, it is "something better" for us to be together; to be part of a whole. Going right back to Moses and then up to today, the impact is lessened if we only consider one small part of the story. We may only have a bit part compared to those heroes from before but we are still urged to play our part. As it says at the end of today's passage... "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

So, this faith thing isn't something we can step in and out of. It wouldn't be faith if that were so. We can't just discard it when the going gets tough or ugly.

This is where our Gospel reading today from Luke comes in. This gives us a fierce reminder that this great story of God's dealings with his world is a story that many people hate and would like to rip apart so they can put something else in its place.

We know only too well that Christian communities cannot always be harmonious, either in their internal relationships or in their relationships with the rest of the world. So, for us to choose to join hands with Hebrew's great cloud of witnesses is to choose not to be part of any other story the world might put forward and that can sometimes cause upset and division.

How might we sum all this up?

As I see it, the writer to the Hebrews is encouraging us to understand that we are part of a greater plan than we might presently imagine. The story of faith began long before us and will continue long after we have left the scene. Our calling is to be faithful, and to look after the flickering flame of faith so that generations yet unborn may give thanks for our commitment in a challenging time.

It would be easy for us to be pre-occupied with our own problems, but as Christians we are called to follow a servant, not a winner - the one who led not

by dominating, but by serving; the one who led not by triumphing, but by being sacrificed.

We have to be open with each other, kind to one another and kind to ourselves. We have no option other than to face into the storm, holding the hand of our neighbour and looking only to Jesus... "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was before him endured the cross disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

So may it be also with us for his sake.

Amen.