

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 3rd January 2021 – Andy Banks
Hebrews 12:1b – 2a - Let Us Run With Perseverance, Fixing Our Eyes On Jesus

Children as ever, please feel free to complete your activities while I talk. I want to speak on our text for 2021, which is from Hebrews 12, the second half of v.1 to the first half of v.2: **“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”** To set that in a little wider context let’s read from Hebrews 11:39 – 12:3. The writer has just finished a roll of honour of Old Testament heroes of faith.

[Read Hebrews 11:39 – 12:3]

11:39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. 40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect [or complete].

12:1 Therefore, 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, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

[Pray]

It is always uncomfortable for a preacher to discover that, if *anyone* needs to hear their sermon, *they* need to! But I confess that has been the case for me as I have prepared this sermon today. 2020 mostly felt like a slog to me. I found myself despondent looking at a situation that shuts out so much of real life, and fearing that it might have no end. I found myself too often allowing circumstances to dictate my choices, my mood, even my faith journey, rather than taking control of *those* things myself. Likewise, with regards church, I found myself too often working *reactively* instead of *proactively*; too often mourning what is *not* possible instead of envisioning what *can* be; too often *waiting* for change instead of pursuing *faith* and *growth* in the midst of the storm. Perhaps you have felt similarly.

And then I started to study this text, which follows a chapter that *is* littered with Old Testament heroes who boldly blazed the trail of faith in the midst of often the most severe trials, even persecutions. And who thereby fulfilled God’s purposes for them in their time (whether or not their contemporaries acknowledged that). And as I read some commentaries, I heard God asking me, “Do you believe that you should have a faith walk with no *suffering*? Look at Jesus’ cross! Do you *want* to be like him or not?”

And then I read Tom Wright’s perceptive observation about these old heroes of faith: “They were out of tune with their times because they were living by *faith* in God’s *future* world while society all around them was living as though the *present* world was all there was or ever would be; and God was giving them strength to live like that, thus proving the truth of their claim.” And again, God asked me something like, “What does *faith* look like in the midst of this Covid-crisis? How are *you* living *distinctively* from the society around you in the current setting – you singular and you the church?” These Old Testament heroes didn’t even know the whole story – they were missing the vital completion of the picture, which is Jesus! And yet they lived by *faith*, trusting that God had a better world for them than all that they saw around them. And their lives and their willingness to suffer bore witness to the truth of that belief.

So, the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that these heroes of old, who bore such faithful witness to God's faithfulness, surround us in heaven like a cloud. The picture is that they're watching us, cheering us on, willing us to succeed in this race of faith, like *they* succeeded. I wonder, would we live differently if we were conscious of our lives being watched by Moses or David or Sarah or Rahab? ... Yet, spur or encouragement as their watching might be, the writer says we shouldn't focus on *them*. Rather, we should fix our eyes on another witness – the faithful and true witness of Rev 3:14 – who watches our life of faith and, more than *anyone*, wills us to succeed: Jesus Christ. The one who blazed a trail to demonstrate the heights to which human faith should aim, and the one who finished his work on the cross to ensure that our faith *will* one day be completed, perfected.

Fix your eyes firmly on him, think deeply about him, meditate on *his* journey of faith – that's why we'll be picking back up our series in Mark's Gospel in the coming weeks – meditate on *his* journey of faith, especially his willingness to endure the shame and suffering of the cross. Why? With one purpose. That we might "run with *perseverance* the race marked out for us."

There is great effort in that word "race" – it is a word that elsewhere is often used of a fight, a struggle! And that effort is reflected equally in the word, "perseverance." The Christian faith is not an easy, quick race – it is a hard slog of an endurance race (sometimes harder than at other times). The only thing that will keep us running true is to fix our eyes on Jesus. Meditate on how *he* ran this race before us. Remind yourselves that he runs with you. At the same time, picture him *watching* you run and *willing* you to succeed. And especially, picture him waiting for you at the finish line with his arms open, and his commendation ready, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

So, let *us* fix our eyes firmly on Jesus this year. Let us not brush over the details because they may be familiar. Let us go back again and again to drink deeply from the well of inspiration that is his life and death and resurrection. So that we can run *our* race with perseverance.

But we don't just run *any* race – and certainly not the convenient race of our own choosing, or the fantasy race of our own imagination. No, we must run the race that has been "*marked out for us*." That's true for us as individuals and for us as a church. It is not for us to look at what others are doing and say, "We must do that!" (though we may gain inspiration from others). Rather, it is for us to *listen* to God, individually and collectively, and to do what he calls *us* to do.

And it is the race marked out for us *at the present time* that we must run now. Not last year's race, or the year before that. Nor looking too far *ahead* – if there's one thing that last year taught us, it is that plans can change very quickly. Yes, we should plan well, but we can only truly run the race of faith in the midst of the situation in which we currently find ourselves. So, what does it look like for us to run with courageous faith in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic? How should we imitate Christ's suffering, self-giving, life-giving love? How can we *be*, and *bring*, good news to our neighbours, our community, our family, our friends, one another? How will people know that we have a hope in a better world – and not a vain, pie-in-the-sky hope, but a sure and certain faith in the God who has promised to make it happen? How will our lives be distinct from those around us? What bearing will the perspective of eternity have on our choices today? Would we live differently if we were told that these are the last days of this world? That's not a claim that they necessarily are, but actually it shouldn't make a difference, because we are meant to live *permanently* in the expectation that Jesus' return is imminent.

Yet, as we ask these questions, we must recognise that, throughout history, to live by faith in God's future better world is to court ridicule, derision, even angry opposition or persecution. Faith is *never* risk-free. Rather, faith

faces risks and chooses to trust in God through it all. True, it is also possible to confuse undirected recklessness with faith, which is why it is so important that we make plans and decisions *together*, and not based on our *own* feelings and thoughts, but prayerfully seeking *God's will* – the race *marked out* for us.

Nevertheless, we are very capable of getting in the way of God's plans. So often the strongest opposition to God's work comes from among the people of God, not from outside. And that is why this passage urges us to throw off *everything* that hinders, including but not limited to the sin that so easily entangles and trips us up.

What are those hindrances? They are different for each of us, so we could never list them all. But, in the current situation, I believe one of the most common and greatest hindrances is fear. Fear is so often the enemy of faith, because fear looks at the problems, the dangers, the risks, and makes them bigger than they deserve to be. Fear creates in our minds an obstacle that cannot be overcome, something from which, rather, we must run and hide. In contrast, faith recognises the danger (and the fear it can produce) but holds it up against God's power and promises, and chooses to follow God's call, despite the risks.

There is a point where we must accept that sufficient precautions have been taken and press on with God's call. Covid remains a real danger, not to be underestimated as we begin 2021. But, and I say this due consideration, the *fear* of Covid may be as great a danger to God's work among us as Covid itself, especially as the vaccination programme continues. There is a real risk that the fear that has been engendered over the last 9 months may cripple people from enjoying the freedom that the vaccinations are designed to bring. And as God's people we are called to live in faith, not in fear.

What other hindrances might there be? The rest of the letter to the Hebrews gives a few examples, which make for interesting reading. Firstly, there is the desire to *avoid* hardship and difficulty. That is natural, yet Heb 12:4-13 urges us, rather, to *embrace* hardship and difficulty as God's loving discipline towards our holiness. Then there is division and bitterness, for which the antidote is to make *every effort* to live *at peace* with everyone (12:14-15). There is sexual immorality (12:16 and 13:4), and a godless disregard for God's gifts and blessings – treating them as unimportant (12:16-29). An inhospitable attitude towards strangers and the needy may deny us unexpected blessings (13:1-3) – something the nation would do well to heed too! And a love of money and a discontent with what we have is portrayed as a denial of God as our provider (13:5-6).

Finally, and perhaps less expectedly to *our ears*, the writer exhorts us to honour our leaders, to have confidence in them, to submit to their authority, and to pray for them, so that their shepherding work is a blessing, not a burden (13:7-18). We Brits suffer the disease of a critical spirit towards leaders – but Christians are called to be different. There is a difference between questioning a decision in the process of discerning together God's best for his church (which is healthy) and an insubordinate spirit that sets out to challenge God-appointed leadership (which God consistently opposes throughout Scripture). In my ten years at Trinity, I am grateful that *every* deacon I have worked with has only desired to selflessly give up their time to serve the Church. Such leaders are worthy of our honour and our prayerful support, even if we don't always agree with them, and to not give it is a hindrance to work of God's church.

There are, of course, many more hindrances and sins that can weigh us down, or cause us to stumble, lose heart, even abandon the race of faith altogether. That is why the writer urges us to throw them off, which takes conscious effort! But that effort is worthwhile in order to become like Christ, who for the joy set before him, endured the shameful cross for our sake. So, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith," this year especially – and every year. Amen?

[Pray]