

Sermon Therfield Chapel 30th July 2006 Heb 12: 1-4

We've been looking at Hebrews over the months in the mornings

Let's recall the story so far.

The author of the letter (we don't know who they were) is writing to a group of struggling Christians who had been converted from a Jewish background

They started well and the writer commends them for their strong faith in the face of persecution

However, as time progressed they had grown weary under times of trial and testing

Some had shrunk back from their early allegiance to Christ

Many of them had experienced fierce persecution, many had had their homes plundered, some had been cast into prison and others faced ridicule in public

It seems that many were in danger of compromise or even of giving up on Christianity altogether

The writer says that their arms had become feeble and their knees weak

They seemed to be drifting – they had lost direction

As we saw last week, the writer to the Hebrews called upon a whole cluster of OT figures as witnesses to help them on the way

These were people who had experienced difficulties but had triumphed despite these difficulties

And how did they triumph? Not because they had great faith but because they had faith in a great God

So we come to chapter 12

Here the writer introduces two metaphors – pictures - to encourage them to keep going – to motivate them

(1) A race of athletes

(2) A child being disciplined in the home (next week)

This morning I'm going to be thinking about our responsibilities as Christians to make right choices and decisions

There is another side to the coin – God’s power in our lives – his commitment to keep us and see us through this life – the fact that from beginning to end salvation is his work = I’ll speak about that another time

Now we’re going to take up the metaphor of the race

Here the writer of the letter almost certainly has the Greek Games in mind

Across the Greco-Roman world, competitive games were held in every major city and town - athletes would compete in the local amphitheatre

And here the writer likens the Christian life to a race – he says, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us V1b

Now the first thing to be said is that running a race is hard work

It requires lots of training and discipline so that the runners become physically and mentally fit to compete

Running a race requires guts and sticking power and determination

The athletes who ran in the Greek Games would train intensely to compete – the correct diet, the right amount of sleep, constant exercise and practice on the track

We’re not talking about an amble in the park

Races have a finishing line and the runners are determined to reach it

In Ancient Greece there were no amateur athletes – they were all professionals

So the first lesson to learn from this metaphor is that the Christian life is not always easy

Perhaps in the Western world we have forged a blend of middle-class values with Christian terminology

But this version of Christianity bears no relation to what the writer is talking about here

We are called to persevere to the end

- in spite of discouragements,
- in spite of our temperament,
- in spite of our circumstances,
- in spite of the opinions of our friends and families,
- in spite of suffering
- in spite of countless distractions

As the hymn writer says: "I've wrestled on toward heaven,
'Gainst storm and wind and tide"

Because in this life we are still fallen (partially), there is often downward drift in our lives – we can become lazy, comfortable and indifferent

These things are the opposite of what is needed to run in and complete a race

So if we think we can run this race without any perseverance or self-discipline or pain or discomfort, we are deceiving ourselves

Now there are great benefits of being a Christian: salvation from sin and its consequences; a new and true identity; forgiveness; joy, a new family to belong to

But there are times when the Christian's path is one of hardship and difficulty

Paul wrote: "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"
2 Tim 3:12

And: "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" Acts 14:22b

And when difficulties come we are called to keep running and not give up.

So we're in the games whether we like it or not!

(A) And how are we to run the race?

(1) Verse 1. We are to throw off or strip off everything that hinders

Here the writer is not talking about sin – he deals with that in the next phrase

He's talking about anything that hinders us in the race – anything that slows us down or distracts us

It is no good running a race all fat and flabby – you have to be lean and toned

And we can't run a race carrying a suitcase or a heavy rucksack

The problem is that many of us try to do just that

We allow all sorts of things to be distractions to us – things that aren't necessary sin (they may be) - things that we try to hang on to

Careers, relationships, material possessions and funding them, creating the perfect home, hobbies, sports

Bad habits, unwise loyalties, bad company

Now such things may be innocent in themselves (or even good) but all of them can be harmful to us if they are not harnessed correctly – if they become idols to us

They can sap our energy, take up too much time, divert our attention, subtly draw us away from what really matters

We are told to throw such things off so that we can run the race

(2) We are also told to throw off the sin that so easily entangles

It seems from here that sin can cause us to trip and fall – how can we run if we are entangled in sin?

What kind of sin might he be talking about?

Numerous: pride, selfishness, unbelief, self-centredness

It could be the sin of looking for our joy and meaning elsewhere – making God-substitutes

It could be unbelief: doubting that God knows what is best for me

It could be sexual sins

So we are told to throw off our sin

And run the race with perseverance and patience

This is not a short sprint of 100 or 200 metres

It's a lifetime race – so it takes constant training and self-examination

We have to go on and refuse to give up despite all that life throws at us

The concept of resisting and overcoming sin is very attractive when we are new Christians but what about twenty years later?

It's easy to be zealous for the Lord when we young and idealist but what about when we mature and life becomes settled and comfortable?

When we're distracted by crying babies and a demanding boss and a nagging spouse?

When our attention is pulled in every direction

No wonder the Habakkuk wrote “O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years”

He knew that our commitment and walk can become flaky

We are called to patiently inherit the promises of God

Jesus said some sobering things

He said that in the last days the love of the most would grow cold

He also said that those who endure to the end will be saved

(B) What encouragements are there to running and completing the race?

(1) The cloud of witnesses

1 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses”

So the writer remind them of the heroes of faith (discussed in chapter 11)

As we saw last week, they were also runners in the race and they completed it

They demonstrated that despite great difficulties and much suffering it is possible to finish the course

Continuing with metaphor of the Greek Games, the great cloud of witnesses is the crowds of people cheering the athletes on, in the stands of the amphitheatre

Commentators disagree about whether this cloud of witnesses mentioned in chapter 11 are actually watching us now from heaven or whether they spur us on by their example

I tend to take the latter view

In any case it doesn't matter: what matters is that the fact that they lived and completed the course – that should spur us on

And they are talking to us now

They are saying in, “I completed the race by trusting God, you can too”

“It's worth the effort, the self discipline and the training”

“It is worth the suffering, the rejection, the mocking sneer of your colleagues, hanging on in your marriage”

“The finishing line is in sight – go for it”

(2) The second and far greater encouragement is that the race has already been run by Jesus – he is the author and perfecter of faith – we are to fix our eyes upon him

The writer tells us to remember the witnesses (the heroes of faith) who spur us on

But we are to fix our eyes on Jesus v2

Now the word for fix really means to look *aphorao*

The AV translates it as looking – “looking unto Jesus”

The Greek word used here isn’t very common in the NT:

The word is only used one other time

It means to look away from one thing and gaze on another

It’s not just a quick look - it means to be taken up with something – captivated by it – that is why the NIV translates the word as fix

It implies an awareness that there are other things to look at – other things to grab our attention – but this type of looking chooses to ignore these things and look at Jesus

The writer is saying that the only way we will keep going in the race is the fix our attention on Jesus – the one who has already entered the race and won it

In comparison, even the other witnesses pale into insignificance

We are to listen to the witnesses but are to look to Jesus

Their faith is to inspire but it is only The Son – the Eternal God who become a man who provides us with the perfect pattern for living

In him is the final and ultimate model for human existence and success

Here he is called the author of faith (in the NIV)

The word for author really means the pioneer of faith – a pioneer is someone who breaks new ground – who leads the way – who forges a path – the one at the head of a great procession

Jesus is that pioneer - the one who has gone ahead and has run and won the race

In the same verse, the NIV says that Jesus is the perfecter of *our* faith

But in the Greek the word *our* is not there – the writer never says that Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith

It says that Jesus is the author and finisher of faith

Now I believe with all my heart that Jesus is the author and finisher and perfecter of my faith and yours

But that has nothing to do with what the passage is saying

It says that Jesus is the author and finisher of faith

He is talking about the principle of faith and declaring that it is found in Jesus

And even more than that, in him the very concept of living by faith finds its full and final expression

And note that we are to consider Jesus

Not Jesus Christ

Or Christ Jesus

Not Christ

We are to consider Jesus

In the epistles it is rare to find the title Jesus used on its own

It is used to designate and stress his humanity rather than his deity – he is a man living by faith

So he is the perfect example of living by faith – he lived trusting God – his faith never wavered – he was the perfect human being – in his life we see humanity in perfection and we are called to follow in his footsteps

The more we trust God and live by faith the more truly human we are

We are and never were called to be independent

So we are to follow him

Or put in another way – he is to be our hero – someone who inspires us – someone who we seek to emulate

It is difficult to copy God and seek to be like him

But it is within our grasp that Jesus can be our example and hero

Someone we can strive to be like however imperfectly

All these other examples of faith (Ch 11) were imperfect – they were fallen sinful human beings

Even Abraham (the father of faith) made big mistakes – he had a child with his maid – he twice lied about his wife being his sister (half lie)

Noah got drunk...Moses disobeyed God in striking the rock...David committed murder and adultery etc etc

In all of them there is sin and failure

But Jesus was the perfect one – he is the model – the pattern for human living

We are to be captured by our vision of him and that is to hold our gaze for the whole of our lives and beyond

And you know whilst it is true that we think of Jesus having faith in God – it is also true that he had faith in Man – or what he could make it into

He didn't write off humanity but saw beneath all its ruin and sin and shame and pollution – and came to earth to lead men and women out of its mess – to restore them to His original design

And that's why he went to the cross – verse 2 “for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross and scorned its shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”

What is the joy that was set before him?

It was partly to do the will of God and bring glory to Him

But in this context it was to lead sinful men and women out of sin and ruin

It was and is to lead a people all the way to the right hand side of the Father as his chosen and beloved bride – soon to be married to himself at the consummation of the age – the Marriage of the Lamb

He is the pioneer of the way for human beings to enter God's presence – to enter heaven

By being jointed with him by new birth and baptism and faith union we can accompany him there.

You see the finishing line is at the right hand of God – that's the joy ahead for each Christian – Jesus is there - he has run the race and has finished it – he is at the finishing post to welcome his people home – those who follow in his steps

But before then – before we reach the finishing post – how do we run the race?

What does it mean to follow in his footsteps – to run the race with our eyes fixed on him?

As human beings we need heroes

And in our age we desperately need to recover the concept of the hero

Lots has been written about the role of heroes in shaping the type of people we are

What it means to be heroic has a massive impact on the kind of people we aspire to be

If we think that only children have heroes we are profoundly mistaken

All of us have pictures in our own psyche of the kind of people we would like to be like and when we live up to this picture we feel a sense of achievement

But if we fail to live up to it we feel shame

All generations fix on people and revere them – in the past it was often people of character that the media and public paid homage to – people who were courageous, adventurers, philanthropists, strong leaders,

Many people argue that the hero is dead today - in our cynical age we debunk every person and the ideals they stand for

One postmodernist said that every ideal is a smokescreen for self-interest and the exploitation of others

If you think that you'll get pretty cynical

In the past heroes were often heroes for their moral qualities

But in our amoral age, one where we don't have agreed morals, our concept of the heroic has been stripped of its moral content

The result is that we have celebrities who are heroes – people who may have a talent (like David Beckham) or a beautiful body, or who are simply well known for being well known – one thing is for sure - few if any are famous for their character traits or moral values

And because most people can't be as talented as David Beckham or Michael Jackson or have the body of a supermodel, being a hero is beyond our reach – few people can be heroes

So if few can be heroes and those who are, are usually eventually debunked by the media, we won't have anything to measure our aspirations against - so we lose our aspirations to greatness

The concept of what is heroic is one of the most powerful things in giving direction to us and society at large

And as Christians, we too need a concept of the heroic – true greatness

We need a way of living that has been demonstrated in real human flesh

Not just a creed, not just a set of ideals or teachings to live by and for

Someone who has gone before – a pioneer – a leader by example – someone to emulate and aspire to be – someone's footsteps to follow in – someone whose living revealed what it meant to be truly human and truly heroic

We are called to consider our hero – the true hero – the prototype hero – the original hero – Jesus – we are called to fix our eyes on him and imitate him

So what does it mean to imitate Jesus? To follow him in the race?

Well it doesn't mean what some people think it means.

It doesn't mean wearing sandals and growing a beard and long hair

It doesn't mean fasting for 40 days, not having a job, not owning a house, not getting married

Imitating him is following the quality of his life

And when we struggle in the race we are to look to him – How did he cope?; How did he react? – What did he value? What were his priorities? How did he triumph?

Imitating Jesus

Means to love as he loved – with love that gives expecting nothing in return

It is to forgive as he forgave – unconditionally

It means suffering unjustly if necessary and leaving our vindication to God

It means giving generously – Christ who was rich become poor that we might become rich

It means living humbly – esteeming others higher than ourselves

It means the service of others – Jesus said true greatness it is to serve

It means taking our stand with him for truth and righteousness and against error and sin – it means siding with him

Jesus was the true and ultimate hero - to follow in his footsteps is true heroism

In all of our life calculations we are to consider him –

We are called to repent of and leave the heroes of our age – not to follow them – the heroes of fashion, of money, of fame, of power, of the playboy lifestyle, of self-serving and self – preservation and follow the True Hero

Jesus followed this way and found true glory and honour – only by following his footsteps is the path of glory and honour

Being heroic to Jesus was doing the will of God

And if this is true, seemingly small things can be heroic

How we treat our wife or husband; what we do with our money; serving others, laying our lives down for the church, suffering unjustly and not complaining

We can all be heroic by simply doing the will of God

We don't have to preach to 1000s or convert our entire office or save a child from drowning to be heroic

It is God who is the final arbiter of whether or not an action is heroic or not

It is the living God who will judge the motives and actions of every heart and who will one day turn all the values of our fallen society on their head

All the false heroes of today and their actions will be publically shown to be worthless

And these who have been truly heroic will receive their reward

Even Jesus kept going because of the joy that was set before him – for reward

So contrary to appearances, running the race in Jesus' footsteps is not mainly loss – in fact it is overwhelmingly gain

The cross which seemed to be the greatest failure of all, was actually the greatest triumph of all when viewed from the standpoint of the resurrection – Jesus was the greatest winner of all

His way is the way to final victory

But the cross also remind us that running the race after Jesus will not always be easy – the way of the cross can seem to be the path of loss and pain

But if we fix our eyes on Jesus v2 – if we consider him v3 we will not grow weary and lose heart

Closing thought

Helps us to think rightly about the value of what we do – the estimation we put on what we do – about what is heroic

“Lord, help me do great things as though they were little, since I do them with your powers, and help me to do little things as though they were great, because I do them in Your name”

Blaise Pascal