

RUNNING THE RACE

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 16th February 2003

Hebrews 12: 1-2 & 12-17, 1 Cor. 9: 24-27

Theme: Running the Race

I chose this theme many weeks ago, and some of you will remember me mentioning it prior to a sermon during January. It all came from looking ahead at the readings set in our Lectionary (the organised pattern of Sunday readings which we and many other churches follow). I dropped the OT reading for the day, in favour of a second NT passage on the same theme, which complements what we have heard in the first NT reading, although I will not devote time today specifically to that second passage.

So, let me go straight to today's passage from the book known as "The letter to the Hebrews".

The context, for those who may be unfamiliar with it, is that of an unnamed Christian writer to a community of Christian believers, all or most of who are Hebrews (i.e. Jewish) and who have embraced faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah about whom their scriptures prophesied.

For this, they face persecution, which is increasing in the Roman Empire. They are wondering whether it isn't better to set that faith aside - at least temporarily - and revert to being "only Jewish", as that is more "politically correct & expedient" in a climate of persecution of Christian believers. (And you thought "P.C." was a new term?)

The writer elaborates how Jesus is the fulfilment of previous prophecy, and in every way surpasses those who came before, including Moses and all the prophets.

After detailed explanations as to why they should not jettison even one tiny bit of their faith in Jesus, in this Chapter (12) he speaks directly to their temptation to set aside their faith in order to avoid persecution and other troubles associated with it.

He likens faith in Jesus to a race. Let's explore it in more detail.

But in doing so: Take heart, those of you who may be "non-athletic."

The analogy of a sports race is not only for those who understand race running.

It has application for all of us, even for those who may be like a middle-aged friend of mine, who says that as soon as the urge for exercise comes along, he goes and lies down until the sensation completely goes away! Even those unfamiliar with athletic training or for whom the phrase "pumping iron" invokes a great yawn, will understand the need for perseverance.

That is essentially the message the writer has for his intended readers, and also for us, generations later.

The “cloud of witnesses” he speaks of, refers not to literal spectators, but to pioneers of the faith, from Abraham onwards. They are “veterans of the struggle” so to speak – the struggle of life and faith. They are witnesses / “martyrs” (from the Greek word “martyria” meaning “to testify or give witness to...”).

They have already run the race, which is not a short-distance sprint requiring a single spurt of energy, but a long-distance event. Many of them also experienced great hardship, yet God was faithful to them because of their faith in him and their perseverance through hardship. They now virtually cheer us on, as we struggle along.

The passage speaks especially to those who have ever had times of hardship in life and faith, and who have been tempted to question whether “hanging on” in faith is worth it. I know that applies to many people here today, people who have had to face tough issues and experiences of life that have challenged them and their faith.

Some people here will likely have truly “hung on”, and known the grace of God in their lives as they experienced that God did not let go of them! They have experienced that deep sense of purpose and inner conviction that gives one strength to push through tough circumstances, towards the goal.

Read Hebrews 12: 1 & 2 from the contemporary English translation “The Message”.

Every person likes to think their hardships are unique; and every generation likes to believe that the problems they face are tougher than any faced before. “Not so”, say the witnesses.

Circumstances differ, contexts in which people find themselves vary, but the crucial issues remain the same. Human sinfulness and its side effects have not changed in thousands of years, nor have the effects this has on the world. Each person and generation must deal it with as a matter of personal choice.

Faced with personal difficulties, almost every person asks “Why me, Lord?”

But we may well also ask, “Why NOT me?”

That is not to be unsympathetic, nor is it a refusal to acknowledge genuine pain and difficulty, rather it is an acknowledgement that life is often unfair, and that being a Christian doesn’t exempt us from hardship or trouble.

Therefore what counts is my faith response to God in the face of troubles. Am I going to “hang in there” with God as my creator, friend and faithful saviour, or am I going to jettison faith in him the moment the race gets a little tough?

Further verses in Hebrews Chapter 12 tell us that some (important: not all, but some) of the troubles we face may be to train us in God’s ways. Others may be to discipline us in the same way that a good parent doesn’t allow a child to get its own way in every matter, but disciplines it for its own good. The child may not appreciate the benefit of that at the time, but the effects will be enjoyed later. And many troubles are

of our own making, or simply but perversely a result of evil and others' sinfulness in our world.

But ... it is endurance in our faith that matters!

“Staying the course, until the race is over”, to continue with the race-running analogy.

The writer suggests that we “study how Jesus did it”.

In the same way that a runner keeps eyes on the goal, which is the finishing line, Jesus kept an eye on his goal, and on his purposes for suffering, which were to bring God's promise of salvation to us. He knew there would be glory after his ordeal on the cross, and accomplishment of his mission. He not only had an outward goal, but inner conviction and integrity of principles. All of this is what gave him the ability to hold out until the end - which is what perseverance means.

That is not the silly “pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die” stuff. For Jesus, his death and resurrection were real, and a true and complete triumph over evil and death. Similarly, for the hundreds of eyewitnesses to his resurrection, it was real ... real enough to change their lives dramatically, and to give many of them the tenacity to hang on when later they found themselves persecuted for their beliefs based on personal experience of the Risen Christ.

The writer speaks of Jesus as being “author and perfecter of our faith”, which sounds similar to the title of the Risen & Glorified Jesus, given in the Revelation to John, as “Alpha and Omega”. He is the beginning and end of all things; and he also is a faithful starter and finisher of the race.

We are urged to lift drooping arms, strengthen weak knees, and find a straight and level course so as not to inflict (further) injury on ourselves. It is a universally understood image – the person with drooping arms and knees ready to give way.

It may be fatigue caused by backbreaking work in the fields, by fighting fires or assembling factory parts all day or just from dealing with difficult people and the emotionally difficult blows of life. The last thing needed is another hill to climb!

But the fatigue to combat here is that which drains the life of faith, or which tempts us to forsake it.

This includes ignoring it, or being indifferent towards it, which amounts to the same thing in Jesus' eyes, as it is a failure to take his words seriously and to make personal choice regarding salvation.

We are exhorted to strive for peace and purity of life. It is one thing to be troubled, quite another to be a troublemaker. If we live in faith, we may make enemies, but we need not try to make them.

At the heart of the Christian faith needs to be an insatiable appetite for the “shalom” of God - His peace and holiness. That means a pursuit of holiness, of a character shaped by God instead of being misshapen by the values of a sinful world.

As I close, I do so with a repeat of some of the words heard already this morning.

I also close with a reminder that Lent, our 6-week period of preparation for the celebration of Easter, will be upon us in 3 weeks’ time, and I commend to you the mid-week services and course being offered in that time too, which will further help us to examine what it means to allow our character to be re-shaped by God, instead of being misshapen by the values of a sinful world. All of that, too, is to enable us to run the race with perseverance.

Close with reading selected verses again:

Hebrews 12, also from The Message

(or for readers on the website – any translation is OK:

Verses 7–17;

Then ... v. 28;

Lastly vv. 2 & 3.