

Hebrews 11:29-12.2 (Lk 12:49-56)

Continuing the theme of faith

Prayer 'Open our eyes O Lord that we might see Jesus, open our ears that we might hear his voice and open our hearts that we might receive Him.'

Last week Tudor made the point that he is an ideas man, he inhabits the world of thinking, of concepts and maybe might tell a story for an illustration. And he noted that I am the other way round. I am a story teller and consider what that story might have to teach us, afterwards. I thought it only fair that you should have a few stories this week

Anyway, we continue our theme of faith looking at the book of Hebrews – Tudor had spoken last week of faith being sure of what we do not see... well, we, in the church today, have something in common with the greats that are mentioned in the Old Testament – they did not see the fulfilment of their hopes – they did not see the Messiah Jesus. Neither did we here today see him: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Said Jesus to his disciples. Jn 20 29

However, we *do* know him by the Word and we *do* know him by faith through the work of the cross and the giving and our receiving of the Holy Spirit. We have so much more already.

We also know him through the testimony of those before us. Not just the Old Testament greats who amazingly hung on in there, despite having no experience of God incarnate, Jesus Christ. But also those over the last two millennia we've heard of, who have walked in the knowledge of forgiveness in Christ, a sense of freedom from fear, a new purpose in life, sense of significance, an extraordinary peace even in the face of all sorts of turmoil, and have acted accordingly. And of course there are those who have had an influence on us in our own lives today.

I am mindful of a young man training in the UK to be a missionary for Turkey. Without any knowledge of God at that time, I was a bit rude to him; 'what gives you the right to tell the Turks how to live?' I demanded. 'Well, I'm not,' he replied, 'I'm just going to tell them about Jesus, they can take it or leave it.' Nonplussed at his response I watched him closely and was deeply moved to see he actually did what the Bible said. He was different. Later, once I had

made my confession of faith in Christ (oh my word what a difference that made!), I remember one of my erstwhile buddies announcing to others: 'well if it happened to *her*, there *must* be something in it!'

In Christ our attitude and orientation changes – we are transformed. We no longer fearfully cling to the ways of the world of materialism and insurances for ourselves and for our own. We have wider more expansive horizons of concern. We are safe, we know we are loved and forgiven, we are free to share and to look beyond our little three score years and ten...or twenty or even thirty now. Life in this broken world is hard and challenging, it is also exciting and, for us in Christ it is not all there is.

There is something lovely about the verses: 'Yet all these (OT faithful to God heroes) though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without *us*, be made perfect.'

They experienced such hardship and yet they persevered in faith without the knowledge of salvation in Christ. But the promise will be fulfilled at the resurrection. And more, we read that 'without *us*' the completeness cannot be. ALL of us with faith in God's ultimate goodness need each other, our witness and actions, and we are to be together in unity when the Kingdom comes in all fullness.

It is not easy to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus. It is not comfortable. It needs courage and discernment and thankfully the Holy Spirit can give us both. And unlike the Old Covenant believers, we have the Bible, the written guide.

What does this mean in practice for each disciple, each person exercising their faith in Jesus? What does it look like to 'run the race with perseverance'? How does that work in each different culture, each different social situation?

When we come to believe we proclaim Jesus is Lord. We may find a piece of scripture, the word of God that particularly drives us. 'Follow me.' The simplest of Jesus commands. Or perhaps his words in response to the question 'what must I do to be saved?' 'Love the Lord your God... with all your heart, mind, soul and strength AND love your neighbour as yourself. But it also means we observe and learn from each other.

It clearly is going to be challenging – look at the gospel reading and Jesus telling us that he had brought division!! He knew what was likely, no,

*inevitably* going to happen with us in the Kingdom of the 'now and not yet' – as we continue to grow towards wholeness.

Of course we all know about division – only have to look at the Lambeth conference! But isn't it amazing that despite (or because of?) such divisions – the church hanging all its dirty washing out for all to see and hear – the church still exists and persists. And despite (or because of?) enormous suffering in some parts of the world, just like the old testament faithful – the church is still growing. It exists and it flourishes through the testimony and practice of others. Forgiveness and reconciliation is very powerful.

Did you know that the fastest growing church today is in Iran? And of course look at the phenomenal growth of the church in China – where oppression of believers is well known. Where it is extremely dangerous to covert to following Christ, we know very little. It is sad to see the return of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan yet the gospel is still touching and changing lives. Three men who worked alongside a group of medical missionaries some decades ago, asked for a Bible, read it and turned to Jesus. Aware of the danger, they asked to be baptised 'as it says in the book'. At huge risk they were duly baptised in a pool in a back yard. 'this is the happiest day of our lives' they proclaimed. They are all dead now for their faith but the witness goes on: 'that they should be so convinced that they would give their lives – we need to know more.' Please pray for those who are in grave danger for their commitment to Christ.

It is good to remember the Holy Spirit within us. Even in dangerous situations the Holy Spirit is still always at work in us and despite our fears, is noticeable! Working in Afghanistan the team of expats were continually aware and anxious – we feared drawing attention to and endangering the local people for their attachment to us. Whether they worked alongside us or were recipients of help from the various projects – they would be under constant scrutiny by the Taliban and others. One such character at the end of his contract with us, was returning to his home in Pakistan. He said: 'You people are different, you love each other,' (really? – we were only too aware of how we sniped at each other, stressed and tired as we were.) 'And not only that but you love *us*. I will never forget you.' That was as close as he dared to share. And what an encouragement to us it was. 'He that is in us' showed.

Jurgen Moltmann is one of Tudor's favourite theologians. He was a Nazi brownshirt back in WW2. To cut a long story short, as a POW here, he was

given a Bible and on reading it, chose to follow Jesus. He said: 'This is a God who suffered with us, this is a God I can believe in.'

And that is the key. Jesus Christ, fully man suffered in our stead. Jesus Christ fully God – the 'author and perfecter of our faith' made the Kingdom of God real and available in the here and now as well as to come for us all. Let us be encouraged by 'the great cloud of witnesses' to this good news. Let us consider the injunction here to: 'lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely' in this our imperfect world, 'and run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus ... 'as so many have done before and continue to do today.

Amen