

5th November 2023 – Good News #10 ‘The Church – The Body of Christ’ (Hebrews 11:29-12:3)

Among the many tragic stories unfolding in the war between Hamas and the state of Israel over recent weeks, one which is hardly being told relates to the small Christian population living in Gaza. Although an estimated 50,000 Christians live in the Palestinian territories as a whole, nearly all of those live in the West Bank – only little than a 1,000 Christians live in Gaza. This tiny population is essentially totally independent of the tensions that exist between the much larger Muslim and Jewish populations, and yet Christians have been disproportionately affected by the war.

For example, in all the reporting of the bombing of the Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza, it was hardly mentioned in our media that this is in fact a Christian hospital – established by Christians, but serving the whole community of Palestinians. Nevertheless, the local Christian bishop, Bishop Alexis has vowed to remain in Gaza to pastor his flock – he posted this on 18th October: “Until there is at least one Christian in the territory of Gaza, I won’t go anywhere, because I can be a hope for them, so I’ll stay in the province that believes in me. If I die, I’ll have a decent death as my portion!”

It is hard to imagine the courage of this particular Christian leader, and yet his determination to face risk for the sake of his faith is utterly consistent with the story of scripture, and of the early church. The first segment of our passage for today makes for hard reading – the last three verses are the bit that is well-known, oft-quoted and much-loved, and we’ll get to it in minute, but we tend to read it in isolation, leaving out the difficult it beforehand!

The ‘great cloud of witnesses’ which the author of Hebrews uses to inspire us faced a variety of extraordinary challenges. The previous chapter outlines some of the famous ones: Abraham, Joseph, Moses – but then reminds us of the many unknown heroes of the faith. The forgotten followers, who, as the text says, ‘faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.... They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated... they wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.’

And yet – as the author also says: **‘the world was not worthy of them.’ They faced all this, in the faithful expectation of the fulfilment of God’s promises.** Even more remarkably, the author tells us that ‘these were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.’

Wow. That is some level of faith – and the Church is the inheritor of their legacy. Today, in the week that we celebrate All Saints Day, we’re thinking about the Church, in particular what it means to be the Body of Christ. And whilst we looked at this over the summer from the point of view of the gifts that we can all contribute, there is another meaning to this image of ‘body’. **Christ’s body suffered, in order to win our salvation** – so, as his body now on earth, followers of Christ also face the reality that our faith sometimes calls us to face hardship or even suffering for our faith.

For many of us in the West, that hardship may be more in the ‘jeers’ category – but, in this season of the year, we particularly remember the many places of the world where the persecution is much more blatant and severe. Places like Nagorno-Karabakh – again, largely misreported this year in the Western media as a casualty of so-called ‘ethnic tensions’ after invasion by Azerbaijan. The reality is much closer to home – after Azerbaijan invaded on 19th September and seized the territory, within a week almost its entire population of 120,000 Armenian Christians had fled to Armenia, losing everything in the space of a few days.

As fellow followers of Christ, if one part of the body suffers, all suffer. We are called to pray for our sisters and brothers, and to support them practically in whatever way we can.

But the author of Hebrews doesn't stop there, he also has a positive message for his readers. 'Therefore,' he says, 'since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses....' – we are challenged, but we can also be inspired by their example. And he gives us three specific encouragements:

First, let go of the baggage: (v1) 'let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.' The image here the writer uses is that of a race, and the first thing he reminds us is to take off our extra layers. I like to think here of those swimmers who come out dressed in those huge padded coats to keep warm before a race. Very useful when you're not swimming, but imagine any of these elite athletes trying to swim in one! No, the writer says, let go of anything that stops you running your race of faith. Think of Jesus' advice about the thorns in our lives – the pursuit of wealth or pleasure, distractions, or worries. Don't let them choke you – throw them off.

Second, keep running – (v1) 'let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.' Run the race, he says – but let's not miss the two little phrases in this sentence: we are to run the race marked out for us: in other words, don't run someone else's race, run your own! What is God calling *you* to do and to be? Over the years, I've wanted to be a missionary overseas – but realised it wasn't my race. Then I wanted to be a prison evangelist – but it wasn't my race. Then I wanted to be a heroic church planter – but I don't think that's my race either. Run the race marked out for *you*.

And run it with perseverance. This kind of race is definitely a marathon, not a sprint. Half the battle in our journey of faith is keeping going. We are to keep on keeping on. Not having baggage makes a big difference, but so does the final bit of advice:

Finally, eyes on the prize: (v2) 'fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.' Just in every race, we have a finish line to aim for – to be with Jesus. We are with Jesus now, of course – but we will be with him for all eternity, too. We need to keep looking up, and also keep reminding ourselves of what Jesus endured. Like any great leader, he never asks us to do anything he hasn't done himself. Jesus is both our model now, *and* our finish line ahead – the means *and* the end.

So, although there are so many things to pray for, so many difficult situations, the author encourages us not to lose heart. We have the cloud of witnesses to inspire us. If you've ever been part of a big crowd, cheering your team or favourite sportsperson on – now imagine that heavenly team, cheering for you.

I'm reading a book at the moment about a chap cycling the route of the Tour de France, completing each stage a few hours before the main race comes through. And each day a crowd is already gathering, to cheer the main race – but remarkably, they also begin to cheer every cyclist. He describes the extraordinary sensation as an amateur of toiling up a mountain and suddenly finding himself in a cacophonous tunnel of noise cheering him on: 'Even in my fatigued state, he says, it brings a surge of adrenalin and a change of pace, which receives an extra cheer. This is surely as close as I'll ever come to knowing what it must be like to do the real thing.'

That, my friends, is our experience too. **The great crowd of witnesses is cheering us on. Let's keep running as the body of Christ, fixing our eyes on Jesus. Amen.**