

Sermon – 17th August 2025 Trinity 9

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Hebrews 11: 29 – 12: 2 Heroes of faith – cloud of witnesses – fix our eyes on Jesus

Luke 12: 49-56 Not peace but division, interpreting the times

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for all that you endured for us. Open our eyes now and help us to fix them on you, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Introduction – 1904 Marathon

The 1904 Olympics, held in Saint Louis, USA, is justly famous for being the most disorganised Olympic marathon ever.

One runner from Cuba arrived very well dressed – beret, shirt and trousers. When he saw what others were wearing he cut off the legs of his trousers to make them into shorts. He hadn't eaten for two days before the race, and was feeling a bit hungry, so he stopped to eat some apples from an orchard along the way. The apples were rotten and he developed severe cramps. He lay down and took a nap, and eventually returned to the race. He finished 4th. That gives you some idea of the standard.

It was a very hot afternoon, but the organisers wanted to study the effects of dehydration on the runners, so they only provided water in two places. Frederick Lorz became so miserable that he hitched a ride at mile 9. Not far from the end, the car broke down, so he hopped out and ran the rest of the way to the finish line, where he was declared the winner and received the gold medal. He got to shake hands with the president's daughter before being disqualified for cheating.

The eventual winner was Thomas Hicks. Despite the heat his coaches wouldn't allow him to drink anything – but finally had pity and gave him a drink of raw egg whites laced with performance enhancing strychnine. He became very weak so they gave him more strychnine along with brandy. Near the end of the race he began to hallucinate and thought he still had 20 miles to go. He started running wildly all over the place. That was when his coaches grabbed him and carried him across the finish line to win the race, with his legs still running madly!

The Christian life is very much a marathon, rather than a sprint. And sometimes it may feel just as chaotic as the 1904 Olympic race. It's hard and exhausting. Jesus never said it was going to be easy – in our gospel reading today he predicts division and hardship, not a peaceful ramble.

Hebrews 11: Heroes of Faith

The book of Hebrews was written to encourage Christians to keep going and persevere to the very end of their race. Chapter 11 recounts the stories of many heroes of faith who did extraordinary, illogical and reckless things because God told them to. People like

- Noah, who built a huge boat miles from the sea
- Abraham who took his family, left his secure and comfortable life, and set out on a journey with no idea where he was going
- Moses who risked his life to tell the all-powerful Pharaoh to let God's people go.

Many others are listed and commended for their faith though they never actually received the ultimate reward of seeing the fulfilment of God's promises.

The cloud of witnesses

Around the halfway point of the Boston marathon, hundreds of students from nearby Wellesley College line the route to create the “Scream Tunnel” cheering on the runners with unflagging enthusiasm. When you are in a big race, you can draw great energy from the crowd, and the expectations of friends and family who have sponsored you. You don’t want to let anyone down.

The first few verses of chapter 12 use the picture of a great race in which we are now running. The heroes of faith from chapter 11 are all around us – a huge cloud of witnesses in the stadium cheering us on. What an encouragement! Imagine how many saints are backing us and shouting for us not to lose heart but to persevere to the end.

Finishing well

In my experience marathons are not really about winning, unless of course you are an elite runner. In fact everyone gets a medal. It’s all about staying the course and finishing. The participants put a huge amount of effort into training, and torture themselves on race day – the thing they want to avoid at all costs is the dreaded DNF on their time sheet: Did Not Finish.

The first few verses of Hebrews chapter 12 has three pieces of advice to us, if we want to finish our race, and finish well.

1. **Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.** I once went for a run in India with a young student. We did about 20km in the nearby hills. Although he was much stronger, faster and fitter than me, he struggled to keep up – especially on the steep uphill sections. The reason being that he had attached heavy weights to his ankles! Someone had told him that if he practised with weights he would be super-fast when he took them off. Indeed, we decided to finish off with a few rounds of a running track. He took the weights off and shot off like a racehorse, while I collapsed in a heap. We can’t run our Christian race with weights dragging us down or with unnecessary baggage and inappropriate clothing restricting us and tripping us up. What is hindering or entangling your Christian life? Is it some sin that you have become too comfortable with. Or material possessions, or the cares and concerns of everyday life that have become more important than doing what God is calling you to? It is time to throw off these hindrances, and get rid of anything that entangles us.
2. **Run with perseverance the race marked out for us.** *Perseverance* can be translated *patient endurance*. It suggests maintaining a steady pace – not rushing off too fast at the beginning and then fading out later. Keep going, ignoring everything within you and around you that screams, “give it up”! This is the kind of faith we heard about in Hebrews 11, where it says, “*some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison ... they were persecuted and ill-treated – the world was not worthy of them.*” Raymond Brown says, “Disciples of Christ must realise that to follow in His footsteps is to experience opposition, pain, suffering and rejection”. The word endurance is used twice of Jesus in verse 3, where it says that *he endured the cross, and endured opposition from sinful men*. Jesus has been through far greater suffering than we will ever face. When everything seems to be too hard, we need to consider him, and patiently endure. With his help we can finish the race. Where are you finding faith difficult right now? What makes you want to resign from the race? Consider Jesus, and patiently endure.
3. **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.** When you get tired on a long run, the temptation is to bow your head, getting slower and slower, desperately trying to keep putting one foot in front of the other. But it is much better if you can look

up. We may not be able to see the finishing line, but we can usually see another runner ahead of us. Focus on keeping with them, don't let them pull away. See if you can catch up with them, little by little. If you can stay with them you will eventually reach the end. In the Christian race Jesus is described as our pioneer – he has run the race before us, he knows the route and has already led many others this way. He is our pacemaker. How can we fix our eyes on Jesus? Although I try to spend time every day reading the Bible and praying, God is soon forgotten as I plunge into my work. Are there little pointers we can build into our routines to remind us to keep lifting our eyes to Jesus, and keep them fixed on him? One idea is to use everyday actions as specific times to raise our eyes to heaven. Maybe a simple prayer, such as “*Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*” every time we go up the stairs, or saying the Our Father whenever we wash our hands. Building little habits like these can help us to keep our eyes on him more and more each day.

Perfecter of our faith

Hebrews 12:4 also describes Jesus as the *perfecter* of our faith. It is easy to get over-awed by the heroes described in chapter 11, but it is almost as if the writer has picked them specifically as *bad* examples. Samson may have conquered the Philistines but he was a philanderer with a mean temper. Gideon started off a coward and ended up an idolater. Jephthah made a rash vow and sacrificed his own daughter to fulfil it. The point is that, despite their failures, God still used them. Their weaknesses were turned to strength. Our faith does not need to be strong. Even as small as a mustard seed, Jesus can take it and perfect it.

Faith in Hebrews 11 is indispensable: without faith it is impossible to please God. But all these heroes and antiheroes had one thing in common – their faith was *active*. Because of their faith they DID something that God asked of them. Noah built a boat, Abraham left home, the people of Israel walked round and round a city till the walls tumbled down. Faith is not something tucked away safely in our heads. True faith steps out of comfort zones, and across boundaries.

So don't let your weaknesses, your lack of faith or past failures stop you from taking that scary step that God is calling you to. Talk to the person you sense needs a friend. Give your time or money in service to others. Volunteer for some task that you feel ill-equipped for. That is faith – it is active not passive.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you endured the cross for our sake. You are the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. You are our guide and pacemaker. Help us to fix our eyes on you, and run with perseverance the race you have marked out for us. In your name, Amen.