

**St Botolph's Church Worthing**  
**14 August 2016**  
**Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2**  
**Reverend Roger Walker**

Last Sunday we heard that wonderful definition of faith from Hebrews – 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for – the absolute certainty of things not seen'. Today the theme continues, showing just what faith did for the people of the Old Testament, when the promise God made to Abraham was finally fulfilled and God's people escaped their slavery in Egypt and came into the promised land. It's all very positive and encouraging stuff, recounting the great leaders of the Old Testament and the things that their faith made possible.

Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised and the Hebrews recounts various well-known episodes from the Old Testament: all showing how something good came from faith in God. But then suddenly in verse 35 everything changes. The verse starts with women receiving back their dead, who are raised back to life again – a direct reference to Elisha bringing back to life the Shunammite woman's son in 2 Kings 4. But then, halfway through the verse, faith results in being tortured – but refusing to deny God because of the hope of resurrection.

Then there is a whole list of dreadful things done to faithful people. They face jeers and flogging – one thrown into prison in chains, one put to death by stoning, one being sawn in two and one by the sword. Their prosperity is also stripped away from them. They went about dressed in animal skins, they were destitute and had no homes but wandered in deserts, mountains, caves and holes in the ground.

How can this encourage anyone to think faith is a good thing? And, worst of all, the men of the Old Testament: for all their faith, they did not receive what God had promised. They had the physical promised land but what good was that when the spiritual promise of eternal life remained beyond their grasp? They had to wait for Jesus, and then they had to see everything they believed in turned upside down as he opened eternal life: not just to the chosen people – the Jews – but also to all mankind.

The New Testament, with its promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus, changed everything and Hebrews assumes that they welcomed this. It is perhaps another Biblical reference to that strange phrase in the Apostles' Creed – 'he descended into hell'. This means that between his death and resurrection Jesus revealed himself to the faithful souls in that rather gloomy afterlife that the Jews call Sheol, and they believed they were saved.

Then, as our reading closes, we have a picture just like the Olympic Games, where all these faithful souls are sitting in the stands watching us in the arena. We are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses and, like the Olympic athletes, we must run with perseverance the race set out for us. However, athletes run a physical race and our race is spiritual. We have to throw off everything that hinders us and the sin which entangles us so easily.

This is where God's message to us really comes today – we know that holding to our Christian faith is not easy, but we do not anticipate flogging, torture, imprisonment, stoning or – especially – being sawn in two! The worst we will get is a few jeers. So we are to live out our lives showing to those around us that, whatever happens, we are reflecting God's love and we live in anticipation of heaven. It's hard, however, to be dispassionate about how well we are doing. This is where the crowd of witnesses comes in, for we must try to look through their eyes – eyes that had held to their faith through great suffering and even martyrdom – and see how they would judge our rather feeble efforts.

There are all sorts of things that hinder us. We find it hard to let go of our physical wealth and possessions and see them as just something lent to us by God, to use to serve him in this world. We find it hard to let go of relationships that pull us away from God – rather than encouraging us closer to him. We want to enjoy ourselves. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, provided we are walking in God's ways and showing God's love as we do this.

Then there is sin: sin which so easily entangles us. Just one small step off God's path, one tiny disobedience to his commandments, and we can find ourselves sinking rapidly. For, having done something small, what is there to stop us doing something greater? We all know the pattern, but around us all the time is a crowd of witnesses to help us run our race as well as we can, by God's grace. We need to be saying to ourselves: are they cheering me? Are they sitting in stony silence? Or are they booing me?

We know that every thought and deed is fully known by God and we must assume that the spiritual witnesses know it as well – so we must judge our spiritual endeavours – our race – through their eyes. 'Am I being cheered for doing the best I can? Am I being booed because I am not really trying to avoid sin and stay on God's path? Or is there a stony silence because I could do better? They know it and I know it.' Cheering crowds help Olympic athletes to victory, and cheering crowds of witnesses help us to reject temptations to sin and to stay on God's path.

We must ask ourselves today: Am I being cheered by the crowd of witnesses because I am avoiding sin and walking with God? And, if I am not, how can I change my life so that cheers will break out from that cloud of witnesses as I run with perseverance the race marked out for me - and for me alone – by God.

AMEN

Rev Roger Walker

14.8.16