

Sunday 17th November – Hebrews 11:32-12:3 'The race of faith'

Today's sermon is really a 'part 2' to the first half of chapter 11 we looked at two weeks ago...

I've recently been reading a book about snow – with a whole chapter dedicated to the science of avalanches. As long as you're at a safe distance, there's something awesome about an avalanche – the roar, the speed, the sense of momentum... I like to call today's passage 'the avalanche of faith'. The chapter as a whole feels like the spiritual equivalent of a snowball picking up speed as it careers down the mountain. The first 29 verses focus largely on a few central characters and only take us a third of the way through the book of Exodus. Verses 30 and 31 speed us up to the book of Joshua – and then the avalanche really begins!

In verse 32 we cover the rest of the Old Testament, with some accompanying description of the valiant deeds of this additional list thrown in for good measure in verses 33-34. And then the perspective widens out completely to the great cloud of witnesses: the thousands upon thousands of faithful souls who lived and loved and served their Lord – unknown to history, but known to God.

Many of them paid a significant price for their faithfulness, as the passage reminds us in verses 36-38. Even those who didn't, however, kept the flame alight, kept the faith alive. These are the people that Pete Greig describes so evocatively in his poetic vision which birthed the 24-7 prayer movement:

'Don't you hear them coming? Herald the weirdos! Summon the losers and the freaks. Here come the frightened and forgotten with fire in their eyes. They walk tall and trees applaud, skyscrapers bow, mountains are dwarfed by these children of another dimension. Their prayers summon the hounds of heaven and invoke the ancient dream of Eden.'

The frightened and forgotten with fire in their eyes... children of another dimension. Most of us know someone like this. A quiet hero, who lived their faith in a way which inspired us. Probably someone unknown to the wider church, but known to us – and known to God.

And that's the point: in the end whether others applaud our faith doesn't matter that much – but God sees, and commends, and blesses. Our faith is always known to him – and God is cheering all of us on. Including you, and me.

So as we reflect for a second week on the nature of faith, this is our first point – faith is known to God. Take a moment now, or later today, to give thanks for those quiet heroes, those children of another dimension that have inspired you.

Our second point is this: 'Faith looks forward to something better'. Next week, it will be my privilege to attend the Milton Keynes Confirmation Service, something which takes place every November and where people from around the city publicly affirm their faith in Christ, and their determination to live for him through the rest of their lives. It is always an uplifting occasion, as we celebrate what God is doing here, especially in the hearts and lives of particular people.

It is an inspiring reminder that faith continues to blossom and grow from one generation to the next. God is still looking after His Church, and the kingdom of heaven continues to be at work on this earth. As the author brings this amazing chapter to a close, he or she summarises in verses 39-40 what energised the people described very simply and profoundly: even though they did not receive the fullness of what was promised (v39), they perceived with the eyes of faith that 'God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.' (v40)

Faith is ultimately a forward-looking attitude. Yes, it looks back to the saving work of Christ as a constant encouragement and source of our assurance. Yes, it lives in the present outworking of our day-to-day lives – but it also carries us towards 'something better'. Coming full circle to where we started this chapter, 'faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see'.

(v1)

The full revelation of God in Christ was ultimately what the ancient heroes of faith were looking in hope towards – hence they also share in the benefits that Christ has won for all of us. And this forward-looking perspective is what energises our present. As we shared two weeks ago, it is not ‘pie in the sky when we die’: but something real to carry us through all the seasons of life, both good and bad, light and dark, happy and sad. As any seasoned walker will tell you, that moment when we see our end destination puts new energy in the legs, however far away it seems at the time.

Advent begins in two weeks’ time, and one of the things we’ve lost recently is that, traditionally, Advent did not just look forward to Jesus’ first coming, but also to his second. Perhaps that is a perspective we can recover this December – because real, life-giving, faith always looks forward to something better. And today, let’s give thanks that we *do* have such a hope – and may that future hope give us fresh energy for all we face at present.

Third, faith fixes our eyes on Jesus. When our kids were toddlers we went to the park most days. We were lucky to have two or three options nearby. It was a great way for them to let off steam, have some fun and provide a change of scenery. Any of you who have (or remember having) young children will know the drill at the park. Lovely as it is to be there, and even if you take a few minutes to sit down or chat to another parent, all the time your eyes are fixed on a small moving object(s) which is in constant motion – your children! Wherever they run, your eyes, like a guided laser, follow them round.

This is a skill it takes time to acquire: that capacity to follow your kids even in a crowd, or when ducking behind play equipment. You learn their methods, their preferred locations, any surprises they might have up their sleeve. The real childcare experts – and when you start at the park you are in awe of other parents who seem to have this sixth sense – manage to look unflustered, sipping their coffee or enjoying the sunshine, and yet always intervene at the right moment, just before their child gets themselves into trouble.

Learning to fix your eyes is a valuable skill – and as the writer draws this amazing section to a close, they make the same observation about faith: **ultimately it comes down to one thing: it’s about where we fix our eyes. Or rather, on whom.**

In the end, the key to the life of faith is to fix our gaze on Jesus. Why? Because Jesus is the source of faith *and* the example of faith. Our faith is *in* Jesus, and also modelled *by* Jesus. And as Jesus faced all that life and death threw at him and overcame, so we too can do the same.

As we fix our eyes on Jesus, we gain the capacity to cast off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles. As so much of Hebrews has made clear, it’s Jesus’ blood that washes us clean, and opens up the way to a new life.

As we fix our eyes on Jesus, we renew our strength to run our race with perseverance. The life of faith is often described as a race – but let’s be clear that it’s a marathon, not a sprint! We need perseverance, endurance. And we gain that by fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Finally, as we fix our eyes on Jesus, we gain the resolve not to grow weary and lose heart. If you ever try and climb a mountain the advice is – look up, don’t look down! It’s good advice for the life of faith too – **look up! Fix your eyes on Jesus. There you will find all you need.**

There too we might glimpse that great crowd, cheering us on. Can you hear them? One day, too, by God’s grace, we will join them – hallelujah! Until then, let’s all pray that we, too, might live faithfully, according to their example, adding our contribution to the continuing, *growing* avalanche of faith in our world. Amen.