**29th April 2018**

**Hebrews 10.19-39**

Nine years ago my football team, Burnley, got to the Premier league for the first time. We were tipped for automatic relegation and indeed we went down straight away. But remarkably we have bounced back and now stand proudly seventh in the league which this year will entitle us to a place in the European competition next season for the first time in 52 years. My brother, an avid Burnley fan like myself, nine years ago, rashly promised my son, Sam, who was only eight years old at the time, that should Burnley ever get into Europe he would personally take him . Wherever they played: Kazakstan, the Faroe Islands. They would go. Even though he was eight, Sam has a good memory. Uncle Andrew do you remember……

Be careful what you promise.

We finish our look at the letter to the Hebrews this morning and consider its call to persevere in the faith – to stand by your promise to follow Jesus Christ. To have confidence in the promise God makes to us through Jesus Christ, sealed in his bood.

Hebrews 10 from verse 19 states:

***19****Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,****20****by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,****21****and since we have a great priest over the house of God,****22****let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

Liz looked last week at the sacrifice of Christ that unique, once for all sacrifice and how we can understand it today.

This passage starts by saying because of the blood of Jesus we can have confidence to enter the most holy Place.

Why should we have confidence in the blood of Jesus?

12 years ago we went as a family to visit friends of ours who were working as Christian missionaries in Nepal. We arrived the day after a mass religious sacrifice of animals. In the centre of Kathmandu is the durbar square, the ancient royal centre of the city. There is a large figure of a Black Shiva or Kala Bhairab. The Hindu gods are manifestations and incarnations of the one God Brahman. They represent different aspects such as creation, destruction, wisdom, preservation, reproduction. Bhairab is the god Shiva in his most fearsome aspect and this huge stone image is terrifying. The god has six arms, wears garlands of skulls and tramples a corpse which is symbolic of human ignorance. We had just missed the annual sacrifice of goats to this god. Each year a hundred goats are brought to this spot and are decapitated within an hour. The sacrifice is offered as a way to appease Shiva and hopefully hold back his powers of chaos and destruction from the city for another year.

The concept of sacrifice and the common place nature of blood shedding are remote for us in the western world.

But many people are anxious about their fates. They may try to do deals with the Almighty or the gods. If I do this – will you do that? I will sacrifice this in order to gain that.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews considers the sacrificial act as central to the work of Christ as a High priest who on the Day of Atonement went into the Holy of Holies in the temple to give a sacrifice to God for the people’s sins.

The author of Hebrews does not explain how sacrificial blood effects cleansing and atonement, and the ancient logic is not clear to us. He simply shares with his Jewish contemporaries the assumption that it does: ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (9.22).

Certainly in those days, covenants or promises were sealed in blood. A sacrifice would be made on both sides of the agreement. It was symbolic for saying that if I should break this promise, if I should not keep my side of the covenant, then my life is forfeit – take my blood, my life. This promise is sealed in blood.

So what the writer to the Hebrews is trying to put over to us in dramatic imagery is that we can have confidence to come into God’s presence because of the blood of Jesus.

You may not be sure you are good enough to come into the presence of the Holy God. You aren’t. You may be feeling full of guilt or shame. You may feel you want to stay in the shadows – you don’t want to be open to God’s light and scrutiny – well God is God and knows all about you anyway. You may have doubts whether God is good, whether God has it in for you, whether God can be trusted.

The blood of Jesus is God’s commitment to you. The blood of Jesus shows how the extent of God’s self-sacrificial love offering. It is God saying he loves us, loves the world, loves humanity, loves you – and seals that promise in blood. On my life I will forgive you, I will let you in my presence, I will have mercy, I do want that relationship with you.

Blood is synonymous with life in the Bible. Life is the most precious thing in the world and sacrifice was seen as offering life’s most precious thing to God. At the back of all this is the eternal principle that forgiveness is a costly thing.

But that is only half of the story. We can have confidence that we are welcome into God’s presence but we need to approach as Hebrews says, with sincere hearts, full assurance , hearts that have been sprinkled and cleansed and washed with pure water.

There is a saying that ‘God will forgive me: that’s his business’. Well God has promised to forgive but we need to approach with a sincere heart wanting to be forgiven, acknowledging our need, otherwise we trivialize forgiveness and are presumptuous about God’s offer of it.

Human forgiveness is costly. A son or daughter may go wrong; a father or mother may forgive, but that forgiveness has brought tears; it has turned your hair grey and put lines on your face, a cutting anguish and a long dull ache to the heart. It didn’t cost nothing. There was the price of a broken heart to pay.

Divine forgiveness is costly. God is love but God is also holy. God, least of all, can break the great moral laws on which the universe is built. Sin must have its punishment or the very structure of life disintegrates. That’s why this chapter warns about the judgment of God and falling into the hands of the living God.

But the good news is that God alone can pay the terrible price that is necessary before we can be forgiven. Christ has taken the sting of death.

Forgiveness is never a case of saying ‘it’s alright; it doesn’t matter’. Forgiveness is the most costly thing in the world. There is nothing that brings a person to their senses as to see the consequences of the effect of their sin on someone who loves them or on the God who loves them for ever. God has a crucified heart for the sin and suffering in the world.

But Hebrews reassures us that if we are sincere we have full assurance of God’s welcome and approval because of the blood of Jesus. God in Christ gave his life on it, sealed it in his blood, the promise of mercy and forgiveness and the chance for cleansing and purity in God’s sight – not because of what we have done or not done – but because of the blood of Jesus.

Think of Christ, described in Hebrews as the pioneer of our salvation, the anchor for our soul, taking on sin, suffering and death for our freedom and hope.

On our trek in Nepal Libby got stung by a wasp and our guide picked up the wasp in his hand and carried it away from us. It reminded me of a story about a little boy and his father were driving down a country road on a beautiful spring afternoon. Suddenly, a bumble bee flew in the car window. Since the little boy was allergic to bee stings, he became petrified. But the father quickly reached out, grabbed the bee, squeezed it in his hand, and then released it. But as soon as he let it go, the young son became frantic once again as it buzzed by him.

His father saw his panic-stricken face. Once again the father reached out his hand but this time he pointed to his hand. There, still stuck in his skin, was the sting of the bee. "Do you see this?" he said, "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I have taken the sting for you."

We do not need to be afraid of death anymore, Christ faced death for us. And by his victory, we are saved from sin. Christ has taken the sting!

That’s why the writer to the Hebrews can say: *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

The rest of this chapter returns to the main theme of this letter encouraging its readers not to give up on the faith nor the church, but to persevere, especially when times get tough, when suffering or persecution come, when others let you down or hurt you. Verse 24:

*Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds,****25****not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Chapter 11 lists a gallery of the heroes of faith.

It reaches back in faith to the beginning in Abraham and Sarah, our first parents in faith, and it even goes behind them to Cain and Abel and Noah.

What it says about this long list of remembered people is that every one of them lived by faith. Faith is the willingness to trust our lives and our future to God, even when God does not appear to be as reliable as other, more immediate supports. Faith is the readiness to risk life on the promises of God without holding back. So the text affirms;

By faith our ancestors received approval from God;

God liked how they lived!

By faith, and not by sight,

By faith and not by financial security,

By faith and not by doctrinal certitude’

By faith and not by popular culture,

By faith and not by our morality,

That is how the church has lived; and how the church will not live long or host the goodness and power of God unless there are a strong number of people who believe the good news of the gospel and stake their lives on the very truth of God, that the world thinks is foolishness.

The other week we named some church members who had died in the last year: Joan Kingham, Jean Jukes, Victoria Dixon, Di Baldwin, Eve Fellowes, Christine Patt. We remembered these gutsy, generous people who were determined that Jesus is the good news, who were convinced that God should be obeyed in this place, who were very sure that the good news of Jesus has to do not only with our personal lives but also with our public life and all the stark issues of politics and economics, of housing and schools, and care for the young, old, frail and weak, all those arenas over which Jesus is Lord. The sturdy folk in this church have always trusted Jesus is Lord in this town and in this world.

The text says about those men and women of faith in this place and in every place like this place, that they did not spend their time thinking of the land they had left behind, that they could go back to it. They did not spend their energy wishing for the good old days and engaging in nostalgia. But they desired a better country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.

The men and women of faith in this long recital did not look back but forward, so that the question of faith is only about what is next in the mission of God. All the faithful folk looked forward to risk, not backwards to safety.

The church in joy and gratitude for these two hundred years has to deliberately turn its face away from that glorious past and face the future where God always meets us. This text from Hebrews 11 goes on and on about the past. After Abraham and Sarah there are Isaac and Joseph and Moses and Gideon and Samson and Samuel and David and the prophets, all the people we learned about in Sunday school – or not because we were bored or flirting with a pretty girl or handsome boy.

The text talks about their suffering and faithfulness, their toughness and resilience, and then at the end, there are just two quick verses to finish the long chapter: (Hebrews 11. 39-40)

***39****These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,****40****since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

The ending of the chapter affirms that all these ancestors did well, but they did not get there. They did not receive the full promise. The kingdom of God did not come in their lifetime, and all the deep issues of God’s mission in this place remain unfinished and unsettled. They did not get it all done. And then it says, you might think they were perfect people of faith, but it will only be with us that they will be made perfect.

It is a very strange statement; perhaps it means that how their lives count – depends on our lives.

How well they did is determined by how well we do.

What we do - decides the quality of their faith.

The present actions of the faithful decide the significance of the past.

This letter to the Hebrews is written to people in the early church when faith was risky and dangerous. The letter is written to say to the listening congregation, ‘everything is up to you’. You get to decide the value of what they did.

I don’t know if you have ever gone ten pin bowling. When you bowl and you get a strike – you knock all the skittles over – you mark it down; but what you bowl in the next frame or two determines the value of what you have already done in the previous frame. The intergenerational mystery of the church is like that. The value of two hundred years in the eyes of God depends upon what is done now.

That gives today and tomorrow and the next decades and the next century enormous power over the past. We now can determine what this history adds up to. It gives this present generation the capacity to invalidate two hundred years of faith by copping out. But it also gives this generation the immense opportunity to maximize and enhance what has been done here.

When we had the old vestry where the Vibe is now I used to sit in my study at my desk, on the wall by the side of me were pictures of all the former ministers of this church going back to George Whitefield whose outdoor preaching on the top of Stinchcombe Hill in 1742 started the religious society that became Dursley Tabernacle. When my head was dropping, when I was fed up or disillusioned, when I was being lazy, dragging my feet and not being prepared to make the sacrifice, I glanced up at these guys and they seem to glance back at me. They have been there too and by the power of God they kept going – they fought the good fight and I drew strength and courage from their faith and witness.

This church has much to be proud of in its mission and service to the local community and the wider world. But how that counts depends on now. What will the church be now? What now will we do in a church that lives in a community that is secularised and trusts in the material. How deep now will we go in faith, how serious now about working with children and young people bringing them to follow Jesus Christ; how now to face the life and death issues facing our society and our world? Remember these ancestors in faith desired a better country; and now we inherit the chance for a better faith, a better town, and a better mission from God.

So the writer of Hebrews sums up this chapter of faith and the heroes of faith by saying at the start of chapter 12:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,****2****fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.****3****Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

May God grant us faith, hope and perseverance*.*

(thanks to Walter Brueggemann for this sermon!: Inscribing the Text, Fortress Press 2004 )