**Sermon Dursley Tab 22nd April 2018**

Today it’s the London Marathon. It’s the 38th since it began and approximately 40,000 runners will be taking part. Amongst the runners you not only have well known sporting personalities but also a host of ordinary folk who decided many months ago to enter so that they could raise money for a particular cause.

Now I was a bit of a sprinter when I was young but not a long distance runner. One thing for sure that all these runners will have in common is their willingness to take part in a training programme to prepare, a determination to run the 26.2 miles however hard it is, endurance established through hours of running already, a mental state of readiness and total commitment to what they have to do. Some will do it in record time but others will take hours – but almost all of them will finish it – and they will consider their self-sacrifice of time, energy, their physical and mental exhaustion will have been worth it. But their task will finally be complete, they will have finished and then they will be able to sit back and rest – job done!

Our bible passage today in our series of Hebrews is considered to be a tricky one to get to grips with. I must confess that on first reading I found it so, but after perusing a number of commentaries, Tom Wright and William Barclay in particular, and attending Simon’s bible study on Tuesday I am hopefully a little more informed about its context.

Todays’ Bible reading is focussing on the Unique Sacrifice of Jesus. At first reading the passage seems very repetitive – what is the point that the writer is so determined to get across?

This was a letter written to Jewish Christians, they had committed themselves to Christ but were beginning to drift back to their old ways and relying on rituals and sacrifices that generations of Jews before them had pursued, rather than trusting on the new way that Christs sacrifice on the cross had given them – they didn’t seem to have understood what that meant.

Last week Simon spoke about Jesus as the Great High Priest. This resonated with the Jews. On the day of Atonement the High Priest annually would enter the Tabernacle, into the holy of holies and make a blood offering to purify the temple for the sins of the people. This was regarded as the high point of the year in the Jewish calendar. The High Priest would reappear to the people having made the sacrifice and carried out the purification rituals and he would bear witness to the sins of the people having been atoned.

In the Jewish tradition this was the most important day of the year but it was embedded in a daily ritual of animal sacrifices. Day after day the priests would offer in the morning and evening, a male lamb, another meat offering with flour and oil, and a drink offering of wine along with incense. But none of these took away peoples guilty consciences and feelings of being sinful. In fact it may well have alienated them further from God. It was an earthly attempt to deal with sin and get close to God but it failed. And the priest’s work was never completed, it was repeated day after day.

And we are reminded in the passage that it isn’t even what God wanted. This is the old way the Hebrews are told, it doesn’t work. And so the writer again explains the new way.

What do we understand by the unique sacrifice? Christ not only entered the tabernacle, the holy of holies after his death, but now he remains not in the earthly sanctuary, but now in the heavenly sanctuary , seated at the right hand of god, the father , the one who is there mediating and interceding for us constantly.

But his sacrificial work on the cross is done – once and for all- it is complete. So unlike the Jewish priests on their feet all day busy offering sacrifices, Christ can sit next to God, because his once and for all sacrifice is finished. Just as he said on the cross “it is finished” his earthly work, his primary task is complete. His sacrifice on the cross has got the job done.

Through his sacrifice Jesus has prepared the heavenly sanctuary so that it is now ready for us when our time comes to enter into the presence of God. The Jews believed that even the angels could not look on God and that they had to veil their faces. But no more, through Christ’s sacrifice we can enter and be purified. When Christ reappears it will be to save those who are waiting for him, to transform them into citizens of Gods new creation. This refers to Jesus second coming which was a prominent belief of the early Christians. But it reassures us that whenever the time comes Christ is ready to welcome us.

In Hebrews 9v 26 we read “But now he has appeared once for all, at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself”. A new age is dawning, one that was promised in many of the OT writings and that has been long awaited. Now it is time to focus on the new way, the covenant between god and his people.

Throughout the OT, prophets were constantly reminding the Israelites that God did not want their sacrifices – what he wanted was their obedience. Recall Abraham ready to take his son away into the wilderness to sacrifice him. It wasn’t the sacrifice of Isaac that God wanted, but he sought to test Abrahams’ obedience to Him.

We’re reminded of this need for obedience in Psalm 40 v 6 – 9 ; this is referred to in our reading today. (read the passage)

“A body you have prepared for me”. In other words you have created me to do your will.

Obedience to God’s will is not new to the Jews it’s always been there through the teachings of the prophets, the promises made to the Israelites, but what is new is the understanding of what Christ has done through his sacrifice on the cross.

During Lent you may be someone that likes to give up something you enjoy – maybe wine or chocolate, or something else. You do it in the lead up to Good Friday to help you focus on Christ’s sacrifice. A small act of self-sacrifice but in remembrance of a much greater one.

If we think of self-sacrifice we think of something noble – and so did the Jews, they were giving something that was of value to themselves as an offering to please God. But a bit like the indulgences of the reformation it had become thought of as a way to buy Gods’ forgiveness and it wasn’t working.

In our travels to Peru and Bolivia earlier this year I was very interested by the way Incan, Andean Indians and catholic practices had blended. When we visited Incan temples or their ruins we often came across in old sacrificial niches in the walls, offerings of wild flowers, coca leaves and alcohol and were even more surprised when one day at the top of a long climb following the stations of the cross we found at the last station and alongside statues of saints local people burning coca leaves and alcohol over a fire. We were told the Catholic church is tolerant of these shared practices including these types of sacrifices.

It seemed strange coming from our protestant tradition that has no real place for offerings or sacrifices. We are clear in our theological stance on communion that we **remember** the sacrifice of Christs’ body and blood and make no attempt to re-enact it in any way. We clearly share bread and wine in **remembrance** of what he has done for us. We believe that his unique sacrifice is a one off, there is no need for repetition.

When we look around our world of art, music, theatre – we see many masterpieces. Think about the work of Van Gough, the concertos of Beethoven, the plays of Shakespeare. Their genius is such that it just can’t be repeated. They stand alone as great works.

So it is with the work of God, and the sacrifice of Jesus – it is the greatest masterpiece of all time. Through it we can be cleansed, healed and purified and made ready to be in Gods’ presence. Our sins are taken away, our consciences are free, we are forgiven.

So what is our response to this amazing unique sacrifice. We are part of his new covenant. William Barclay elaborates in a helpful way.

Christ’s entry into heaven is not like the Jewish holy of holies, or a church, he sits in the presence of god, the holiest of holies. So we should not consider Christianity in terms of the church we belong to, our church membership, but primarily it’s about our intimate fellowship with god. Our church membership and belonging is important and can help and support us enormously, but it is not the most important. What is, is our relationship with God our Father, Christ our Saviour and the Holy Spirit our comforter. Those are the relationships we must rely on, so that we can truly dwell in the House of God.

We can think of many examples of people who have inspired us through our lives with their acts of self-sacrifice and service for a cause and who have been reliant on their deep Christian faith. Think of Martin Luther King and his passion for equality, for freedom and for the oppressed gloomy people in USA, that eventually lost him his life. Remember Mother Theresa, working with the poorest of the poor in India to bring them some comfort and dignity,.

Last weekend many of us in this fellowship and friends from elsewhere worked hard to not only run the sportive for the Peace and Hope Trust but also to take part. Over 170 riders took part and contributed to the fund raising effort. It was hard work and just like todays marathon runners took a lot of commitment from those involved, training for the riders, and patience and endurance for those of us doing the organising and adminisstration. The money we have raised, over £4000, will go towards the work of the Peace and Hope trust working for the poor and needy in Nicaragua,. And for many of us that effort is because of our call to do what we can to help the situation there. It is one small response of obedience to do Gods will.

But our efforts are small and miniscule compared to the sacrifice of Christ. So let us consider again how we can be obedient to God’s will for us.

Today we stand at the foot of the cross with absolute thanksgiving and praise because our burden of guilt is taken away. Sometimes we get so wound up with our feelings of guilt that we don’t allow ourselves to be forgiven, we don’t think ourselves worthy and that causes so many psychological problems for us. Christs sacrifice allows us to let it go, to leave it behind. So today if you are struggling with forgiving yourself or someone else, give it to God. Let it go.

Just like the pilgrim in John Bunyans’ epic tale Pilgrim’s Progress, our burden of sin and guilt has been left at the cross. We can go forward in confidence.

Our journey of faith is one of obedience to Gods will, and like our marathon runners of today it requires commitment, perseverance and determination because so much gets in the way of us getting it right. At the first hurdle so to speak, we get distracted, we lose our way, we make mistakes, we upset people, we just get it wrong. We find it hard to forgive others and allow ourselves to be forgiven.

But just like we tell a small child, we need to pick ourselves up, shake ourselves off and keep trying………..don’t give up. Because Christ is near, ready to walk alongside us, his Spirit ready to comfort us, ready to strengthen us. Hold onto that commitment, that perseverance, that endurance that our London marathon runners are demonstrating today. Let’s walk the Way of Christ.

Not only can we worship with confidence and be assured of our forgiveness, but we have the promise of a life with God that goes beyond our death. This hope comes through loving and obeying God. Our response is the offering of ourselves, our commitment to serve and to do Gods will. So let us take time to listen and to hear what God is asking us to do. And be assured he will equip us with whatever is needed for our journey of faith surrounding us with his love.

AMEN

Blessing

Hebrews 13 v 20 and 21

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him,, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for every and every . Amen