

Worship for Sunday 7th August 2022

Call to worship

We have come because of faith, that mystery that surrounds us and in which we live. We are not saints, but by the grace of God we rise and grow. Here, others encourage us to give and be our best, to keep on going, not to give up even when life is tough and faith a deeper mystery.

So, with faith which expresses itself differently in each of us, we come to join this community of God's people, made one by Jesus Christ. He lived and died, surrendered and rose again, and we all have a stake in it. To each one, he offers salvation, friendship and joy. So let us worship God.

Hymn 39: God the Lord, the king almighty

Prayer

God of creation, in these August days, the fruits of the earth are ripening. The raspberries hang heavy on the hedgerows, the rowans in all their shades delight us, and farmers are busy, as ever. All these changes in the earth remind us that you, our God, have planned pattern and order in the universe. We give thanks for changing colours and shapes, the beauty of flowers and the summer birds visiting.

God, you are our creator, too. You have made us different in appearance, skill, gifts and personality, and when we celebrate, rather than criticise, difference, our world and we ourselves are richer. So we are thankful for those around us, those closest to us, the ones we see as they stand near us in worship and welcome us at the door. Forgive us if we have been mean to one another, fault-finding or plain negative...

God who gave us Jesus, you have given us one to follow, to obey, to believe, to honour, and so we praise you for him, for his life and death and rising again, for his perseverance and endurance. As he had faith in you unto death and beyond, let us have faith too. You are near to guide and comfort, sustain and enfold when life is very tough and when our days are sunny.

God who comes in the power of the Holy Spirit to any who will welcome you, we open our hearts as we draw near in worship. Ready our minds to consider the words of scripture and the words of our friends who are wise. Still our hearts that, whatever our need, we may reach beyond ourselves in adoration to contemplate your majesty. And capture our imagination, that we may embrace even that which we cannot wholly understand, what our lives might become holy, full of truth and abundantly loving.
Amen.

Reading: Hebrews 11 verses 1 – 3, 8 – 16

Hymn 162: The Lord of Abraham praise

Sermon

Hebrews 11 verse 1: Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see.

Last Sunday evening, some kind of important football game was being shown on BBC1, so I decided to watch the Commonwealth Games on BBC2 instead. (No harm to the English women – they are a terrific football side). I guess I didn't pay much attention to the Games until 2014 when, of course, Glasgow played host. I was fortunate enough to get tickets for athletics, badminton, rugby sevens and squash, and thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere at each event. The fact that these Games are in Birmingham, so there is no chance of the best action taking place in the middle of the night, means I've spent time most evenings watching some of it. Not only do the "home nations" get to represent themselves – and that's not just Scotland England, Ireland and Wales, but Guernsey, Jersey, and the Isle of Man – but we suddenly realise all sorts of independent nations exist, one of which, I confess, I've never heard of: Nauru. Population: 11 000. Who knew?

On Sunday evening, Clare Balding sat in the TV studio with her panel of swimmers: undoubtedly three greats: Ellie Simmonds, Mark Foster, and Rebecca Addlington. It was an evening of mostly swimming, with Rugby Sevens elsewhere. But whatever happens on track or field, in pool or stadium, in the velodrome or volleyball court, these Commonwealth Games are already memorable, and will go down in history because they are the first ones in which all athletes have been integrated. No hiving - off of the "para" Commonwealth Games to a couple of weeks later. This time, you're watching elite swimmers one minute, and then even more elite swimmers the next: those with a disability: you might have seen Alice Tai in the S8 one hundred metres backstroke, winning gold months after having a leg amputated. A lesson learned: it takes all kinds – *all* kinds - to make a Commonwealth Games. How slow we've been! How come we took so long?

And, as I keep discovering, it takes all kinds to make a faith community. I wish the writer (whoever he, or she, was) of the letter to the Hebrews had thought to include that in the letter, but he or she had other things in mind, not least the fact that the readers were enduring persecution. So we find our writer continuing on the theme of

“faith”, which started explicitly in the previous chapter under a heading our translation gives as *A call to persevere in faith*. The chapter ends with these words: **But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.** A community of faith... that’s us. Our writer will follow with a row of heroes lined up, almost exclusively male, so don’t hold your breath, girls! But before we get to the roll of honour, the gold medal winners, the writer says this: **Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.** Keep it in mind, if you can.

The medal winners include (some missed out in the reading, though): Abel... Enoch (any idea who he is?)... Noah, who would probably have excelled in the Sandwell Aquatic Centre at the Games... and later in the chapter: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses... and then Rahab. A woman! A prostitute! But to switch sporting metaphor, the winner of the golden boot (most goals in a football tournament; at the Euros, Beth Mead, if you’re interested), the biggest star of them all: Abraham. He gets verses eight to twelve to himself. Oh, and yes: his wife, who actually bore his children, gets a passing mention.

But I’m not knocking Abraham. He was, indeed, the “father of the nation”, and the essence of his story is this. According to Genesis chapter 12, he received a summons from God one day. It was a call to leave home: **Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you,** and was backed by this promise: **I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.** Against all the odds, at the age of seventy five (now there’s a sobering statistic), Abraham simply took God at God’s word, and set off with his brother Haran’s son, Lot (mentioned first), his wife Sarai, and all his possessions and family. It’s a long, long story, and you can read it for yourself in Genesis from chapter twelve, but the writer to the Hebrews singles Abraham out for the gold medal for this reason: he obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. Faith has changed from “confidence” and “assurance” mentioned in verse one, to trust and obedience. What is “faith” for you?

It’s all very well, you might tell me, to think of incomparable figures like Abraham, true giants of the faith, but then tell me you don’t see yourself as a likely gold medal winner, any time soon, or even silver or bronze. Here’s a bit of good news: the writer to the Hebrews never said faith was any kind of a competition. He did say this, though:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. If that's what faith is, then it's about something difficult to identify, far less measure. Taking my lead from the writer, I'd like to put it another way: not necessarily "confidence" – who is always confident? – or assurance – surely we all waver? – but perseverance. "Faith is perseverance when we can't see what is ahead, even when we fear what we imagine is coming". Faith is keeping on going, even against the odds. Would that work? I think it would, and I think, measured that way, I am looking out at a massed gathering of medal winners, all gold....

.... because in front of me I see some who have persevered in their faith when life was tough. I see bereaved people, coming to church, week by week, when your hearts are breaking and it would just be so easy to give up your worshipping, church going habit and sit at home and weep, if you could, and announce, if asked, that the reason was that you felt God had deserted you. I see some who live daily up against the fact of frailty, either their own or a dearly loved one's, and might readily have given up, given in, thrown in the towel, and declared, if I'd pried, that you felt God had let you down by not answering your prayers for this progression of frailty to be halted or even reversed. And I see some whose lives have been complicated, or turned into a catastrophe, by circumstances fully known only to you, and the burden of loneliness is a weight you can scarcely bear, some days, and you want to scream, yes, scream, to God in despair, anger and dismay. Gold medals for persevering, all of you.

Jesus, surprisingly absent from our verses today, perhaps, had, I think, just this very thing to say. One day, shortly before his own demise, speaking to his friends and followers on the Mount of Olives, having just come from the temple, he spoke uncompromisingly of the disasters that were imminent, including the destruction of the temple itself. And right in the middle of it, in a speech that would send shivers down the spine of anyone following who was really paying attention, Jesus said this: **the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.** It's not immediately clear what "the end" signified. Did he mean the end of time, or his own end? But maybe the former. This is apocalyptic rhetoric, pure and simple. I invite you to put that aside for now and think of yourself in this way: as one who is standing firm – persevering – to the end. You who sit in church this morning have lived lives of faith that have endured, and are enduring, in uncertain times – personally, nationally, and for the church. You do that, I guess, as I do, because you have confidence in what you hope for, and are assured – somehow, *somehow* – of things you do not see.

But we have this advantage over those to whom the anonymous writer of the letter to the Hebrews penned his epistle: we have seen Jesus. We have seen, close up and personal, what it means to persevere, not only when things are uncertain and promises, having been made, have not yet been fulfilled, but through attack and condemnation and ridicule and suffering and violence and even unto death. And our faith is in him, and through him, in God. Even if God should seem a little remote and beyond us, Jesus, being made human, comes a little closer in our minds and in our hearts. We see him and hear him, walk with him and are taught by him. And even when nothing appears to change despite the earnestness of our longings and the fervency of our prayers, still we trust. We know where he has been. He has been to the cross and still he did not waver. And always, always, he is inviting us: put your faith in me.

If you haven't watched the Commonwealth Games much, or at all, yet, give the Games a look before they finish. You might be fortunate enough to see someone like Aimee Tai, who won gold last Sunday night in the pool, in the S8 event, despite having had a leg amputated. This time round, we don't have to wait a couple of weeks, or months, and then, if you're like me (I confess) not really bother to watch disabled athletes and sportsmen and women at all. This time, the disabled and able bodied people's events follow one another seamlessly. It takes all kinds, apparently, to make a real sporting event.

And it takes all kinds to make a faith community. Obeying, trusting, having confidence, being assured, looking to Jesus, all in our own way. And, by the looks of us, doing it to the end. No need for everyone to be an Abraham, or a Sarah. Enough that we go on, through thick and thin, right to the end. It looks to me as if there is every sign we will do that. Collect your gold medal at the end....

Hymn 490: Jesus, lover of my soul

Offering

Prayer

Living God, in a world of interest rate rises and exponentially increasing energy bills, of brewing international conflicts and the fact of war in so many places, and when so many live under threat of so many kinds, we who are people of faith remember: you, our God, are concerned with the practicalities of our lives. You, who in Jesus

especially call us to fairness and justice, will not leave us to fret and worry and anticipate disaster, but instead comfort us and confront us and call us to action. If we have sufficient (more than!), you insist that we live unselfishly, and share. If we have too little, you remind us that we are right to expect others to step up to help, which begins with prayer...

Loving God, we cannot simply hand over all responsibility to those we have elected – or not! - but we must pray for them, that wisdom, truthfulness, compassion and justice will be their watch words and guiding principles. And we take responsibility in this way, at least: by calling them to account for their decisions, all the while looking to you to help us make the right ones. Let the generosity to which we are invited here in the church overflow into every area of our lives, until our kindness touches everyone who crosses our path.

Faithful God, we pray for all those of faith in our community. May we work with them in the purposes of the kingdom. And we pray for those whose faith is different, or in humanity, and ask that we might influence their lives so that they, too, are bold enough to look to you, you who are the God of all, regardless. Help us to live at peace, if at all possible, in harmony with each other, and to do so with joy and hope.

Eternal God, we pray about our own needs. If the week that has gone has brought difficulty or dismay or despair because of illness, loss or frailty, comfort us. If we have done things over which we are now regretful, forgive us, and show us how to make amends. And if we are lonely, lost, or consider ourselves insignificant, remind us of this: that we matter and that we are treasured, and then help us to reach out to others.

Amen

Hymn 565: My life flow on in endless song

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.