Sermon: All Saints' Sunday, 2 November 2025

> *May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Hebrews 11. 1, 2; 32- 12.2

On this All Saints' Sunday, we rejoice in all God's servants from every age and time, who have served him faithfully and are now at rest. We rejoice that the Church is the only human society that never ever loses a member through death, and that, as our beautifully collect says – we are 'knit together in one communion and fellowship' with saints on earth and saints above. And one of the greatest reflections on these realities comes in today's first reading from the Letter to the Hebrews.

You need to read the whole of Hebrews 11 – for there the author catalogues many of the great men and woman of faith from the Old Testament including Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The author commends them for their faith.

So let me begin by saying something about faith itself. Faith essentially means *belief*; those two English words are translated by the same Greek word *pistis*. The opposite of faith is *unbelief, apistia*, and that was something the author of this letter was very concerned about. His community was under pressure; it was being persecuted. In those circumstances, some members of the Church had fallen away. They *were* believers, but they had become unbelievers. In this sense, unbelief is very different from doubt. All thinking and sensitive Christians from time to time wrestle with doubt, and doubt is to be wrestled with. For faith in God is tested and challenged, but faith can grow and mature through wrestling with doubt. But faith also meets new situations, new challenges, and faces new questions. Wrestling with doubt can lead us into a deeper, more mature faith. But unbelief is much more significant; it separates; it marks a parting of the ways.

The second thing I want to say, a very obvious thing, is that faith is not about sight, but more about *insight*. Faith is a different way of *seeing*. So, in verse 1 of chapter 11, the author defines faith as 'the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen'. And he uses this idea of 'things not seen' in two ways. The author says this of Moses - 'he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible'. Faith is the discernment to see or to experience the invisible presence of God. The 17th century poet George Herbert wrote:

> A man that looks on glass

On it may stay his eye,
Or if he pleaseth through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.

A window can be seen as a barrier, a limit, something as good as opaque, or it can be seen as translucent, opening up our senses to new realities, stretching and enlarging our vision.

The second way in which 'things not seen' is used is a major theme of chapter 11. It is about trusting God in the present about something that will only be fulfilled in the future. So, the author of Hebrews says Noah believed God and built the ark in wonderfully sunny, dry weather when there was hint of a coming deluge. Abraham obeyed God to leave his home without knowing where on earth God would lead him. He received the promised of the land of Canaan for his descendants even though he would never live to see that promise fulfilled. He believed God's promise that Sarah his wife would bear a child, that he would become the father of many nations, despite the fact that he was old and Sarah was past child-bearing. I'll come back to this theme, but I want to say that in Hebrews faith is ***future-orientated***.

The third thing I want to say about faith is that it is about action. In Hebrews, faith is not merely intellectual or abstract. It is not something that we as it were put in a box. It's not even about being religious. It's about a way of living under God that is adventurous, and sometimes costly. The author is impressed by what faith achieves – it 'conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions' – in other words faith makes a difference for good and subdues evil.

The fourth thing I want to say is that faith is individual, but it is also corporate. Hence the great 'cloud of witnesses' of which our passage speaks. The writer to Hebrews places himself and his community within a long tradition – he praises the 'elders' who lived by faith, but quickly he runs out of time, there are so many examples. He could have spoken of Gideon, Samuel, David, just as we could speak of the apostles, and the many outstanding Christians of history and today – like the great saints of ancient Northumbria – Aidan, Cuthbert, Wilfrid , or you ever visit Westminster Abbey - look at the statues on the great west front of the Abbey, all 20th century martyrs, among them Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, and Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda, murdered for resisting the dictator Idi Amin. Both historically and in the present, faith is about the interplay between *I believe* and *we believe*. What *I* believe needs to be checked against corporate believing, lest my believing becomes idiosyncratic, unbalanced, or even false.

And at the end of our reading, the writer makes two profound assertions. The first is this. If you think that Hebrews 11 is only about the super-stars in faith, the heroes, the heroines, and therefore not really about us, then think again. For the author states that all those Old Testament elders cited were still awaiting the ultimate fulfilment of what they hoped for. Why? Because God has chosen to bring them into the final consummation of glory only in union with the Church. Hence, our faith and what faith inspires us to do, is as important as the faith of Abraham, Moses, or Joshua. We become part of the great narrative.

Second, he sees these heroes and heroines as being gathered as it were in an arena. For in Chapter 12, he uses two images – the image of the 'cloud of witnesses' and the image of the 'race'. The image of the *cloud* has a classical Greek background meaning – a great crowd. We seem now to be in the arena, where of course so many early Christians died for their faith. Surrounding us, yes, *surrounding* - are the women and men of faith – the witnesses. It's not so much that the saints of old are spectators watching our every move – we might be spooked by such a thought. Rather, the thought it that we as athletes who are still running the race look to them – and so we are emboldened to run with perseverance the race set before. We look to them, but even more we look to Jesus – described as the author as the 'pioneer and the perfecter of our faith'. Yes, the author is being realistic. Some of his community would be called to follow the way of Christ, to suffer, even to die for their profession. Faith was what enabled them to see beyond that hard experience to the joy and glory that lie ahead – faith is future-orientated. So, since we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, we put away the sin that so impedes us and run with perseverance the race before us – looking to Jesus, who himself, for the sake of the joy that was before him, endured even the cross, and is now at the Father's side. Faith is future-orientated until at last, the saints in heaven and on earth are one.