

**Downing Place
United Reformed Church
Cambridge**

**Sunday 18th August 2019
Pentecost X**

Sermon

Jeremiah 23.23-29; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11.29-12.2; Luke 12.49-56

Holiday reading is often different from what has to be read when we're at work. This year, amongst the sunshine and showers of Northumberland, I greatly appreciated George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. On one level, it's a spiritual biography: the narrative of how life's journey takes a man from a religion of narrow dogma, via a devotion to money that then gets stolen, into an unexpected but life-enhancing love of an adopted daughter. Often described as her finest work, it shows off Eliot's profound understanding of human nature. As is often the case with the contemporary re-publication of these classics, my copy came with an Introduction, which describes context and offers interpretation. Interestingly, though, the Introduction expressly urged that the reader turn to it only after having read the novel. Compliant by nature, I did just that.

Interestingly, our understanding of Scripture, too, is often best achieved by some background reading. That's true, not least of Hebrews from which we just heard. Like Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New, Hebrews can be difficult to penetrate without the benefit of others' insight, whether read before or after the Bible passage itself. Equally interesting though, the basic information about who wrote Hebrews, when, for whom, and why, is not so easy to establish.

As to *authorship*, the only consensus is that it is not by Paul – though some think it is by his co-worker Apollos, which may explain why both speaks of the life of faith as like running a race. (I Corinthians 9.24-27 and Hebrews 12.1)

In terms of intended *readership*, there are lots of ideas, but the phrase in chapter 13, 'those from Italy greet you' (13.24), leads to the consensus that it was being despatched to Rome, as if those greetings are being sent back home by absentees.

The *date* it was written is a little clearer. It was certainly around by 96CE because it gets a mention in the First Epistle of Clement about then, but there is real debate about whether it may have been written as early as the late 60sCE, given that it doesn't mention the destruction of the Temple in AD70, which would seem to be important enough to have got some sort of headline.

And although I say it is a *letter*, there is not even unanimity about that. It doesn't start like one, and lots of people see more signs of it being a sermon, or even that midrash which is like a commentary on Scripture - a marginal note.

So, ironically, amidst the fascination of a scholarly approach, we end up letting Hebrews speak for itself. What is clear throughout, is that it is pastorally sensitive and thoughtful as the author – I'll call him Apollos – tries to explain the benefits of faith in God as people endure life's ups and downs. Apollos cited several in the passage Tim read: how by faith the Israelites 'passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land', how 'by faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish', how others, 'through faith conquered kingdoms, ... shut the mouths of lions, ... won strength out of weakness', and so on.

Few of us are stranger to such things, even if our experiences aren't quite so melodramatic. The life of each of us is characterised by a heady cocktail of joys and achievements, of sorrows and failures, of things everyone knows about us, and of things we don't even tell our dearest friends. As Christians we try to embrace those things within a life of faith, but in truth, running faith's race is far from straightforward. Do you not find that sometimes the life of faith is arduous and difficult, especially if we're up against it in other parts of life? When we're raising children and grandchildren the demands of faith can seem to compete, and as they mature into adulthood, our faith can so easily set us at odds with them as they inhabit our increasingly secular society. (cf Luke 12. 53) Growing old ourselves, or supporting a loved-one who is, can deeply challenge our faith, and leave us wondering what we believe as death beckons. No less does a deep longing for mental well-being leave us pondering what we believe. Living by faith can

be no less challenging when the volatility of the political world alarms us – as we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the onset of the troubles in Northern Ireland in August 1969, why would we now entertain political strategies that imperil the peace that came three and half thousand fatalities later? Yet, what ought the life of Christian faith feed into our political thinking and activity in this fevered era? And the life of faith can also be less than straightforward as we look at the fundamental changes being required of the church in an age of such declining impact and confidence. What does it mean to live by faith today as the church, and as individual Christians? Sometimes it can feel as if we are expected to be as counter-cultural as Jeremiah felt compelled to be.

In all these contexts – and many another – Apollos’s sermon urges us to live by faith in Jesus Christ ... because he is ‘the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’. ‘Pioneer and perfecter’ are big claims to make about Jesus, and they suggest to me that they are intended to inspire us for faith-filled living that depends upon resources far greater than our own ingenuity or strength. Of course, ‘pioneer’ can’t mean that Jesus was the first to believe – after all we heard intimation of all those before Jesus, about whose laudable faith Apollos had no time to tell us. Rather, is Jesus not pioneer in the sense that he goes ahead, he paves the way to put us right with God, and to make a life of faith possible? In that sense ‘pioneer’ is an ideal complement to ‘perfecter’. The one implies initiating something, the other the bringing of it to completion. Jesus is perfecter of our faith by his own utterly complete expression of faith, which we see in his self-emptying submission to the will and way of God on the cross, which itself is vindicated as he springs from the tomb to sit at God’s right hand.

So, in the midst of our parenting, or ageing, or mental health struggles, in a world of political turmoil and in a season of so radically changing a Church, what is it that this pioneer and perfecter of our faith offers to enable us to have life more abundant?

Well, if we let the scripture be more than mere ear-tickling consolation, and rather a fire that burns away meaningless or sentimental chaff, and a hammer that shatters pretension and self-reliance, it seems to me that it is in turning to the Bible that we will find how the pioneer and perfecter nourishes our faith, and equips us for following. So, let me draw to a close with five pointers that are worth careful consideration.

First, in the Scriptures we will find *wisdom*, to help us interpret the signs of the times, so that we react to today’s political environment with a profound sense of what is required if this generation is to see God’s life-giving ‘will done on earth as it is in heaven’. **Secondly**, we will find, too, a renewed confidence in how Jesus Christ *reconciles* us to God, and to each other, that we might face life with that faith which enables us to trust that God is not just with us, but for us with a chesed, a steadfast loving kindness from which God will never resile. **At the same time**, we will discern in Jesus the pioneer and perfecter, thirdly a sense of our life’s *purpose*, as he calls us to answer the chesed of God which he reveals, with our own love, so that we love as we are loved, forgive as we are forgiven, and offer more than we ask. It’s whwere life eventually took Silas Marner. **Fourthly**, the life of that faith which Jesus makes possible and brings to completion, will sustain us with a *hope*, which migrates us away from lamenting the past that has gone, or resenting the present that we regret, and points us toward that reign of God, where sorrow is over and death is defeated. And **lastly**, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith is unceasing in his intercession for us with the Father. That is why Hebrews so emphatically has Jesus not just as pioneer, but also as priest. He prays for us. He brings our prayers to God, which is why we always pray in his name.

Wisdom, reconciliation, purpose, hope and prayer. Such are the gifts of Jesus Christ, that as we leave this place for whatever the week to come offers and asks, we are bidden to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Let us do so, first in the responsive prayer on your order of service.

N. P. Uden
18th August 2019