



Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 17th August 2025

Readings: *Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:29-12:2*

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith”

Running a race - I think almost everyone, whatever their age, understands what's involved in running a race – not so much winning, since only one person can win – but persevering, keeping on going on – until you reach the end. It's not a difficult image. Paul makes use of it in several of his letters, but here, in this letter to the Hebrews (whoever they may have been) by its writer (whoever he was) we are also focusing not just on the runner but on the context – the “*great cloud of witnesses*” – the cheering spectators.

So, for start, what is this “*great crowd of witnesses*”? They are all the people who have already run the race and know what it involves, and the joy of completing it. I believe we can all think of some in that crowd -some perhaps known to us personally, who first pointed us to the race and encouraged us to run, and thank God for them.

For the writer of this letter, however, there is a long history of Witnesses. There is Abraham, to whom God said, “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I shall show you*”; and who “*set out not knowing where he was going*”.

Then there is Moses, and the people who “*By faith . . . passed through the Red Sea as it if were dry land*”. And so it goes on - Gideon and David and Samuel and the rest “*who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouth of lions, quenched raging fire*” “Do you remember Shadrak, Meshak and Abednego and their response to Nebuchadnezzar?

“If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire, and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

That's **faith**; faithful-ness, whatever the doubts - whatever the cost.

And then there are the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah – constantly calling their compatriots back to the path – the true “*Way*” -- faithful to their calling, though it was never easy and it often brought them into opposition with rulers or “populist” leaders. Jeremiah suffered much because he spoke against what he called false prophets – prophets of the “establishment” as we might say: the King, the courtiers, and the temple and priests, who prophesied according to what Jeremiah called “*the deceit of their own heart*”.

Jeremiah lived in a time of geopolitical upheaval, with Judah trapped between the great powers of the day – Egypt, Assyria and the new power of Babylon: the King was trying to protect his country by juggling alliances, while the priests took care of the sacrifices and temple and assured the people that all would be well. Were they not God's “chosen people”?

Jeremiah told it differently. Did they think they had God in their pockets? *Am I a God nearby, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Do I not fill heaven and earth? The false prophets planned to “make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal.” “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”*

But Jeremiah also felt the fire. “*The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long*” he says; - and yet “*If I say, I will not speak any more in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I*

cannot.” And this brings us to our reading from Luke’s gospel - and to the words of Jesus. *“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”*

So what is the significance of fire? Is it a fire of judgment? It is destructive, yes, but it can also be constructive. Fire can hurt but it can also warm. It is incredibly powerful. But it also cleanses and heals. It purifies and refines. God is *like a refiner’s fire*, says Malachi, and Zechariah declares that God will refine the people *“as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is.”* Fire is a test of integrity - it shows up and drives out what is fake. Most importantly, whatever else it does, Fire changes things.

Jesus knew that a time of change was coming. In a series of parables he had been urging the disciples to be ready - to be *dressed for action*. A critical moment – a moment of change - was coming. Part of this would be political change: the power of Rome was soon going to be unleashed on nation and palace and temple, even though nobody seemed ready to recognize the signs, but this was not all. Jesus, like Jeremiah, also felt a burning urgency within himself. *“I have a baptism with which to be baptized and what stress I am under until it is completed.”*

A second baptism – the reminder of the day the people of Israel crossed the Jordan river into a new land, but also a symbol of a death – of death to the old life and birth to the new, which in Jesus’s case would mean a literal, physical death – and what would come after would, like fire, change everything. It would confront people with a choice and create new divisions based on those choices. It would bring a questioning all the old laws – *“children obey your parents”* – son, continue in the line of work your father does – traditions honoured without question. It would overturn old understandings of the Scriptures, of the prophecies, of the Kingdom and of the Promised One who was to come and restore all things. *“Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets”*, says Jesus, in Matthew’s gospel, *I have come not abolish but to fulfil.*” But it will take time to see that. The process will be painful and confusing. It will require faith and hope.

As the writer to the Hebrews will say, later, of all those patriarchs and prophets that he lists, *“all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not - apart from us - be made perfect”* – be completed, satisfied - fulfilled. And, as Paul writes to the church in Corinth - in Jesus, crucified and risen, *“everyone of God’s promises is a “Yes” - but still, “we walk by faith and not by sight.”* - Or run.

Our reading from Hebrews, then, acts as a bridge between the Old Testament heroes and saints and the New Testament believers, the early church, and ourselves. *“Therefore ... since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run the race that is set before us, with perseverance* – or with resolve, or with patience, depending on the translation. (Personally I like *“with patience”* because that word derives from the Latin for suffering or endurance and carries in it the ability to accept delay or suffering without getting angry or upset.) And what will keep us going? *Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith*, or (again depending on translation) *of our faith*. Jesus, the faithful one, the One who teaches and enacts and models for us the original purpose and Word of God for the world - and our faith, our trust in him - the Light that came into the world.

*“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” But **we see** Jesus, who “for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

And we have to run our race today, in a world that is not so very different from Jeremiah’s – or Peter’s or Paul’s. We still have powerful Empires and smaller, weaker countries trying to defend themselves by juggling alliances, even though our wars may operate on a global scale. We still have crowds that run after the latest promises, and people who are lost - *sheep without a shepherd* – exposed to widely divergent and often conflicting ideas, traditions, values. This globally connected

world confuses us. We invest thousands in rescuing or saving one life, but are apparently unable to rescue or save thousands dying of starvation. We cheer the launch of rockets into outer space, but put barriers in the way of people driven from their own lands by oppression or climate change to seek a new home and future. How do we balance these things?

It has been said that modern mankind no longer believes *in anything that is always and everywhere true and valid*. Can we still pray for or put our faith in the rule of God? – or of the kingdom for which we pray? Well - the Christian church still stands and has spread; and even if it has wandered off the Way so often, and sometimes so terribly, the history of its reformations - a great many reformations - shows how constantly we are called back, renewed, restored to new life; reminded of our true purpose.

We can point, too, to changes for the better. Global thinking has given rise to a belief (a faith?) in “human rights” and International Law – even if these are not globally observed. We have many active charities, both international and local and based on principles of justice and compassion, even though their activities are limited and we know there are still many “orphans and widows” in the world beneath our radar. Martin Luther King famously declared that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” – a phrase that he apparently took from a sermon by a famous 19th century preacher, Theodore Parker, who said *“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; but I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”*

“Faith” says the writer to the Hebrews, *“is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”*; and Paul, writes. *“for we walk by faith, not by sight”*, or, to return to our original “race” metaphor – we run *“looking to Jesus”* on whom our faith depends. We must run with purpose – one step after the other, day after day - hoping that as we do so we shall learn to see more clearly, love more dearly, and follow our Master more nearly, day by day. There isn’t any other way to run a race.

We have, too, our own *“crowd of witnesses”* to encourage us; great men and women of the past, as well as people we have known and learned from, and can thank God as we remember them. We have the Holy Spirit, the Pentecostal Fire, to give us strength to keep running if we ask for it, and to teach us how and what to pray, day by day. “Spirit, where are you pointing me? What do you want me to see? To hear? To do, or to pray for? Today”.

Above all, we have Jesus, *the Way, the Truth and the Life*.

The Way – set out in the simple (if costly) laws he taught.– the emphasis on the Law *“you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself”*– as your equal; equally of value to God.

The Truth – Yes, there is truth. There is *“righteousness”*; there is a *“moral universe”*, however much our perceptions may be distorted by learned and shared prejudices or ideas.

The Life. The life Jesus led was driven by the need to restore to people their sense of their own dignity and value so that they, too, could live. When he told them that their sins were forgiven it set them free from the heavy clogs of guilt, or stigma, or self-obsession - restored to newness of life by the faith he inspired in them. His words were given for us, too, and for us to share with others to set them, too, free to live.

As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. *Now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

And so we must run by faith - fired by love and gratitude, looking forward with hope, looking upward for strength, and looking inward to find that deep peace, the peace of God, which passes all understanding. Amen. May it be so.

Janet Bottoms: 17 August 2025