**Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 14 August 2022 – ‘The Challenge of Faith’ - by Revd David Cuckson**

**Opening Sentences** (*Luke 12:49-50*)

As Jesus approached the climax of his ministry he acknowledged the challenge that his Gospel message brought:

‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized and what stress I am under until it is completed!’

**HYMN Singing the Faith 346** (*Fred Pratt Green*)

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| 1. Christ is the world’s light, Christ and none other,  born in our darkness, he became our brother.  If we have seen him, we have seen the Father;  glory to God on high.  2. Christ is the world’s Peace, Christ and none other,  no one can serve him and despise another;  who else unites us, one in God the Father?  Glory to God on high. | 3. Christ is the world’s Life, Christ and none other;  sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother -  he, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father;  glory to God on high.  4. Give God the glory, God and none other;  give God the glory, Spirit, Son, and Father;  give God the glory, God with us, my brother;  glory to God on high. |

**Prayer**

Come in weakness; find strength.

Come in sickness; find health.

Come in chains; find freedom.

Come in confusion; find peace.

Come in sorrow; find joy.

Come in doubt; find faith.

Come in despair; find courage.

Come unready. Come alone. Find Christ.

Heavenly Father, we need courage. Everyday crises are enough for us, and hidden fears threaten to undermine us. We find ourselves praying that certain tests should not come our way, and hope to escape many questions. We settle for a superficial routine, and pretend that the deeper issues do not exist. Yet, we are not content to live in this fool’s paradise. We pray for the courage to be ourselves in your presence, so that by your grace we may become the people you would have us be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Heavenly Father, as we turn our thoughts to look for your word to us revealed in Scripture and as it reflects in our everyday life in our lives, we pray for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we may come to understand your eternal truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Hebrews 11:32 – 12:2 (NRSVA)**

*The writer has given some striking examples from the early history of Israel of people acting in their faith in God. He then goes on to refer more generally to the faith of other Israelite heroes before encouraging his readers to look to the example of Jesus.*

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet 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, without us, be made perfect.

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 with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of 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.

**Reflection**

In Jesus as he faced the ultimate challenge in Jerusalem we see supremely faith in action. The writer of the letter to Hebrews refers to him as ‘the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’, the one who through his example and his continuing power and inspiration can enable us to find faith and grow in faith, as we face our own challenges in our lives.

This is not an easy road to take. As Jesus himself said, ‘I came to bring fire to the earth’. To follow Jesus means facing choices, some of which will be difficult. Today’s readings have put me in mind of the theme of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, where, in Bunyan’s dream, we see Christian setting out confidently at first seeking ‘an Inheritance, incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away’, ‘an endless Kingdom to be inhabited and everlasting life to be given us’. A number of companions join him on the way, only to give up when things get challenging. For example, he had two companions with him when they came to the foot of the Hill Difficulty, where the narrow way lay right up the Hill. Christian started up this way, but his companions opted to take one of two easier routes apparently leading around the bottom of the Hill but possibly meeting up with the other way on the other side of the Hill – but one of those alternative ways was called *Danger* and the other *Destruction* and Christian’s companions were lost. Christian carried on his pilgrimage, through obstacles and challenges, keeping true to his vision, maintaining his faith, until he reached his final objective.

The Letter to Hebrews looks back to the experiences of men and women of faith as told in the Old Testament. The letter was probably written before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and before there was a general collection of the experiences of the first followers of Christ. But in any case the writer is more interested in just providing some examples of the kind of challenges where folk witnessed to God’s way by being true to their faith in God. The first group point to the advantages for the people as a whole from their leaders seeking to follow the way of God. Israel gained a land in which they could make their home. The reference to ‘judging’ relates to those leaders called ‘Judges’ who, inspired by God, established a regime of righteousness and a basis by which the people could live in peace and prosperity, a prospect that would be guaranteed by God’s promises for a people guided by their faith. Then follow instances of personal deliverance – think of David, also Daniel, then Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the burning furnace. Next we have instances of how faith brought strength and vigour, like David facing Goliath. There are stories of Elijah and Elisha bringing a woman’s son back to life. And then, finally, there are those people who faced all kinds of hardship and maltreatment, but who were able to keep their faith and left a lasting example for those who came after them.

All these are examples for us to follow. If we keep our faith in God we can face anything, endure anything. We find that we can cope with our concerns, we can work through our difficulties. They may not go away, they may not even get less by any objective standard, but our attitude to them can change. Our life takes on a new perspective, a new light shines through our gloom of despair.

The author of today’s reading is in no doubt as to what effects such a total transformation. Even the characters of the Old Testament, to which he alludes, do not give us the total answer, but rather a provisional one, a guide which only becomes fully clearer when we look to Jesus. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He is our supreme example – he endured the cross, he disregarded its shame, and following him we are enabled to do the same with the hardships that face us. He is our inspiration – by putting our trust in him, we find faith to meet the challenges of life. He is the winner of the race – and we are encouraged to run with perseverance the race that is set before each of us.

As followers of Jesus we can face anything, keep going through anything, and ultimately finish our race in the company of Jesus.

**HYMN Singing the Faith 640** (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer who as a Christian pastor faced up to the evils of Hitler’s fascist regime and sacrificed his life*)

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| 1, We turn to God when we are sorely pressed;  we pray for help, and ask for peace and bread;  we seek release from illness, guilt and death;  all people do, in faith or unbelief.  2. We turn to God when he is sorely pressed,  and find him poor, scorned, without roof and bread,  bowed under weight of weakness, sin and death;  faith stands by God in his dark hour of guilt. | |  | | --- | | 3. God turns to us when we are sorely pressed,  and feeds our souls and bodies with his bread;  for one and all Christ gives himself in death;  through his forgiveness sin will find relief. | |

**Prayers**

Lord Christ, you accepted the gift of life in faith, and lived it out with courage. You were able to walk the narrow path, withstand temptation’s power, and hold fast even in time of dereliction. Surely, you can speak as no other in this anxious age, and teach us all that courage comes from waiting patiently upon the Father. Please give us that strong courage; for are you not with us wherever we must go?

Please be with those who are lost, who simply do not know what they believe, and show them where they stand.

Please be with the anxious, who begin to despair even of life itself and show them meaning.

Please be with the sick, who are held back from the life they would live, and give them hope and healing.

Please be with the bereaved, who are face to face with the hard reality of death, and give them the generosity of spirit to entrust their lost ones to your living care.

Please be with all people who must live out their lives facing challenge as it comes, and speak strong words of courage to their troubled minds, that they may finish their course.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, you kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. **Amen.**

**The Blessing**

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

*[Prayers taken and adapted from More Contemporary Prayers published by SCM]*

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