

Faithfulness and focus

14 August 2022

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

One of our readings today uses the imagery of running a race ... which seems relevant after the Commonwealth Games.

When I was much younger, my interest in running was sprinting – short, fast races that are over in less than 30 seconds – and just occasionally I ran the 400 metres – but it was way too far! ... which is sort of ironic because these days in my sport of orienteering involves running between 7 and 10 kilometres or sometimes longer.

What do you think is important in a running race?

- speed?
- endurance?
- Worrying about the other competitors?

In today's Bible reading there are other factors that are perhaps even more important in the race of faith ... that we'll explore shortly ...

But first we're going to sing a song that picks up the idea of perseverance in following Jesus. It comes from the Assam region of NE India where there is a definite cost in following Jesus.

BIBLE READING

Isaiah 6:1-10

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'

And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'

He said, 'Go and tell this people:

“Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.”

Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.'

[Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#)

By faith the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched round them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw

off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

MESSAGE Faithfulness and focus

Watching the athletics at the Commonwealth Games brought back both good and bad memories for me from my childhood.

First there was the heats of the mens 4 X 100 metre relay. The Australian team was doing exceptionally well approaching the final baton change to our star sprinter, Rohan Browning, and it looked like we would make the final. But then **disaster** struck. Browning stumbled and



tripped and never got the baton. Race over ... which brought back vivid memories of my last ever competitive athletics race back in Year 12 – also a 4 X 100 metre relay where I was the third runner. Our fourth runner took off a little too quickly and I could **not** catch up to him within the permitted change-over zone and we were disqualified. So even running with your best mates and lots of practice, races can still go horribly wrong.



But this disappointment was followed soon after by the final of the mens 1500 metres. In a field stacked with world and Olympic champions, the Australian Ollie Hoare wasn't given much chance. For the first three and a half laps he hung in and hung in, running in about fourth

place. When it got to the last 100 metres you expected the Aussie to fade but he actually got faster while the others slowed down, getting to the front in the final few strides for a memorable win. The race showed that with perseverance and belief, amazing things can happen.

And so to our readings today, starting with the reading from Hebrews. This chapter is often called the **Hall of faith** as I mentioned last week. After focusing on well-known heroes of the faith like Abraham and Sarah



and Moses, this week provides more of a summary. The faithful people of God cross the Red Sea on dry land and see the walls of Jericho tumble down. Faithful leaders from the era of the Judges and then David win military victories, administer justice and are delivered from enemies.

Meanwhile, other equally faithful people are mocked, imprisoned, stoned to death (like Jeremiah), sawn in two (like Isaiah), go around destitute, are persecuted and wander in deserts in order to survive.

All of these people – whether victorious or suffering – are commended for their faith. One important lesson, then, from this hall of faith chapter is that faith in God gives **no guarantee of comfort** or an **easy life** in this world.



What this long list of faithful people does show us is how we might approach our own walk of faith, which the author likens to a **race**. Given the broad range of experiences listed, there is no **one way** to approach this race, but we have the witness or example of the many people of faith who have gone before us.



If we are to run this race of faith we need to throw off everything that hinders or entangles us – every burden that will make the race more difficult and tempt us to give up. But it's **our** race to run – the race that is set before **us**.

So what might be a **burden** to one person – like the expectations of others – might be a spur to someone else. Or it might be that taking on several responsibilities overwhelms one person but energises another person. We all have to run our own race.

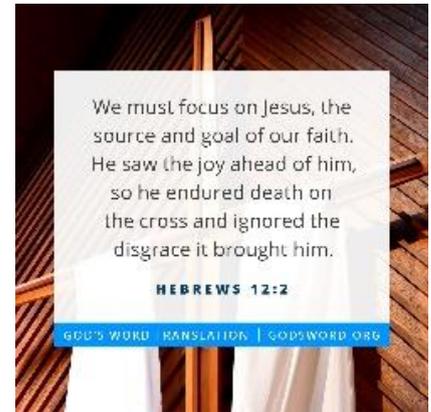
And we need to run with **perseverance**. This race is not a sprint or even a 1500 metre event. It's a **lifelong** race. We want to start strong but also be strong all the way through to the end.

Beyond these tips, there's one more vital factor

... where we need to be looking in order to stay on track as it were. We're called to look to **Jesus** who is described as the **pioneer** and **perfecter** of our faith.



These words could equally be translated as the **source** and **goal** of our faith, or as the **beginning** and **end** of our faith.



Jesus has shown us the path – he has run this race before us. So he knows the temptations and distractions that we face, he knows what makes us weary and he knows what might make us give up.

For Jesus, the biggest barrier in his race was the **cross** – its agony and its shame. The author of Hebrews suggests that Jesus endured the cross by keeping his focus on what lay **beyond** it – the **joy** of knowing that by walking this path, he would open the way for others to enjoy a similar relationship with God that he enjoyed. Also the joy of sitting in God's presence.

So sometimes the race of faith will be painful and costly – as it was for Jesus.

Sometimes it will be filled with joy – as it was for Jesus.

The lesson from Hebrews is to persevere and not to give up.

So three things that will help us in our own race of faith are ...

- The **support of the crowd** cheering you on ... I don't run much in front of a crowd but sometimes I do and it's amazing how encouragement spurs you on to keep going. So speaking encouragement to one another – and also praying for one another are vital.
- Another factor is **how** we run ... with Hebrews suggesting that **endurance** or **perseverance** is the most important thing in this lifelong race, which suggests that we each need to find habits or a routine that will feed our spiritual lives.
- And a third factor is our **focus** ... which is not so much getting to the finish line or winning the race but on **Jesus**. He is the one we are to focus on.

Turning briefly to our other reading from Isaiah and his calling to be a prophet. Isaiah is worshipping God in the temple in Jerusalem and sees a vision of God, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. Angels cry out 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is filled with God's glory.'



In response to the vision, Isaiah can only think '**Woe is me!** I am a sinful person who lives among sinful people and my eyes have seen the holy God!'

Yet God shows **grace** to Isaiah – his lips and his heart are cleansed.

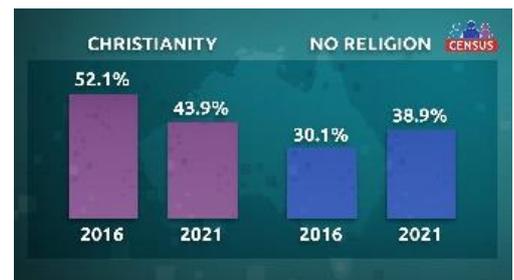
God then calls for a **messenger** to go to the people and Isaiah responds positively – ‘Send me!’ And **the message** he is to take?

*Make the minds of this people dull,
close their ears and shut their eyes,
lest they listen and turn to God and be healed.*

In other words, speak to the people about my ways, but don't expect them to listen or take the message to heart. So Isaiah – who is considered to be the greatest of all the writing prophets in the Scriptures – is given this awful and seemingly fruitless task of bringing God's message to a people who **do not** and **will not** listen.

Jesus faced a similar dilemma in his ministry, which is why he quoted these same words from Isaiah when people rejected his message.

In many ways we also face a similar dilemma. As the recent Census data warns us, an increasingly large number of people have no religious faith and are not at all interested in the institutional church.



So perhaps we face a similar task to Isaiah and

Jesus ... sharing God's message but not seeing many people respond positively?

But perhaps it has always been so. We are not looking for worldly success.

The founding document of the Uniting Church puts it this way:

The church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here she does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. ... The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised land. ... It prays that God will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.

We don't know who or how people will respond to our witness of love and hope. Instead we are called to remain **faithful** and **persevere** and **run the race set before us**, fixing our eyes on Jesus and following in his footsteps and the path he has shown us.