

18 August, 2019

BIBLE READINGS

Hebrews 11:29–12:2

Luke 12:49–56

MESSAGE – Following Jesus, the beginning and end of our faith

People are religious for all sorts of reasons.

For many people, religion is simply **part of the dominant culture** and is hard to avoid ... so for instance, Islam dominates most Middle-East countries, Hinduism dominates in India, and in former times, Christianity was the dominant religion throughout Europe and in Anglo Australia. In each case there are many forms of the dominant religion, but the expectation is that everybody in the culture will follow the dominant religion.

Some people are religious because of **family background**. So grandparents or parents may have attended church and this custom was handed to the current generation ... although in cultures like Australia this is becoming less and less frequent. Other people, such as myself, came to religion only later in life – whether through some sort of **experience** or **crisis** or through **friends**.

I haven't used the word **faith** to describe any of these customs.

So how does **faith** relate to religion (slide)?
Is faith personal and private and mystical
where religion is public and communal?

Although it's hard to tie down precisely,
religions tend to have a social
organisation, and involve certain language,
customs and beliefs whereas **faith** is more
about trust and relationship and the

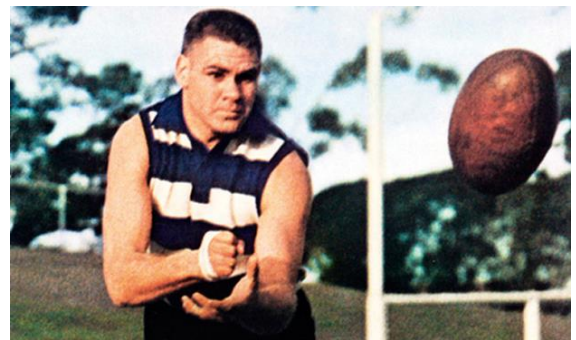
FAITH VERSUS RELIGION	
Faith is the complete trust and confidence in something or someone.	Religion is a specific system of belief and/or worship, often involving a code of ethics and philosophy.
Faith is an internal emotion.	Religion is an external practice or expression.
Faith is the basis of many religions.	Religion cannot exist and spread without faith.
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goalposts one has to live a good life. For Christians, faith is about following Jesus.

In decades past, children were ‘**christened**’ as a religious custom while today we are more likely to refer to this event as **baptism** and see it as an expression of faith in Jesus. Today’s readings both explore what it means to have faith and how this faith in Jesus works out in practice.

Faithfulness in context (Hebrews and Luke)

For those of us who follow football, we have probably heard of the AFL’s **Hall of Fame** and the legends who have been inducted into it. One of these legends, indigenous player Graham Polly Farmer, died this week (slide).



Chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews is known as the **Hall of Faith** (slide) that recounts the names and deeds of some of the legends of faith – people like



Abraham, Moses, Samuel and David – but unfortunately leaves out woman legends of faith – people like Deborah and Ruth and Hannah and Esther. The chapter recalls that these faithful

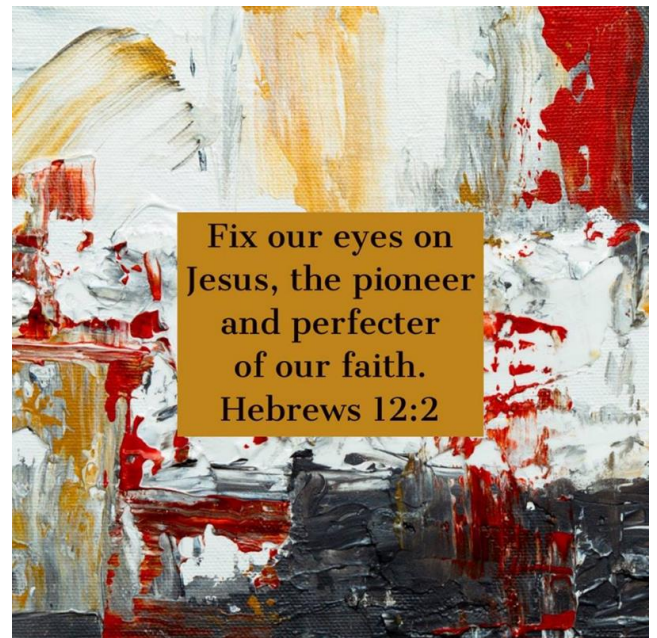
people conquered kingdoms, sought justice and showed great strength in weakness. But it notes that equally faithful people were persecuted, imprisoned and sometimes killed. It just goes to show that faith and an easy and comfortable life rarely go together.

This section of Hebrews exhorts us to persevere in faith, inspired by the witness of these heroes of faith, and counsels us that the journey of faith is like **running a race (slide)** – a race that is even longer than a marathon – a race that will engage our best energies

and focus over our whole lifetime. It needs **perseverance** to keep going and not give up when things get tough. And while speed is not the essence of this race, running this race implies **progress** rather than staying put in one place.



Most of all, though, as we run – or walk – or stumble – through life, we are to **fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (slide)**. Other translations suggest that our faith depends on Jesus from beginning to end, or that Jesus himself began and finished this same race of faith.

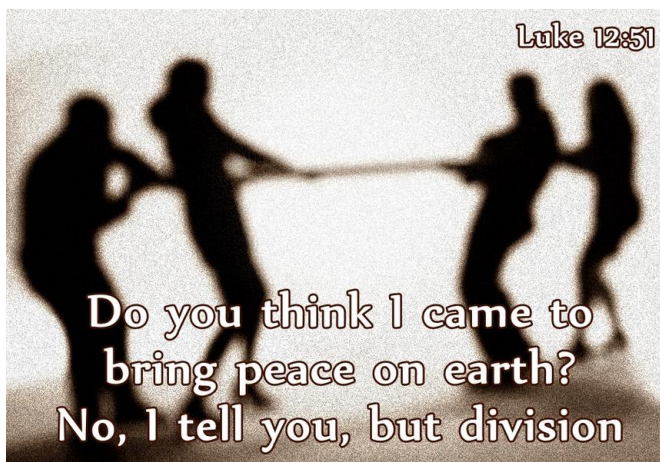


The Greek words used are **beginning** – as in source or origin – and **goal**– as in completion or fulfilment.

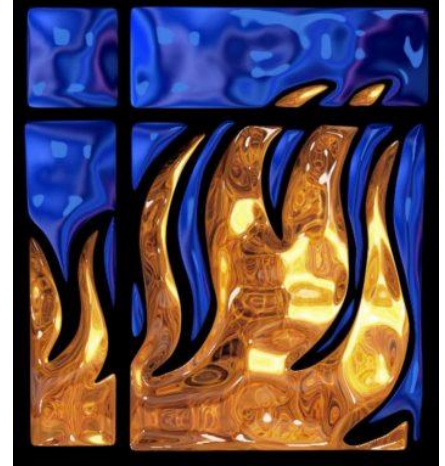
So Jesus is to be both the **beginning** and **end-point** of our faith. He is the inspiration and pattern of our faith, and who, the author subtly reminds us, in his race, endured the shame of the cross for our sakes. So if we want to know how to live a life of faith – we need to focus on Jesus – and his example of perseverance, courage and joy.

But we also need to pay attention to Jesus' teaching – and today's teaching from the Gospel of Luke is mighty uncomfortable. One commentator described this passage as one of the **Ten Things We Would Rather Jesus Hadn't Said**. Jesus destroys the rosy image we often hold onto of him being meek and mild and the Prince of Peace.

Listen! says Jesus. I have come to bring **fire** to the earth (**slide**)! the sort of **fiery judgment** that John the Baptist spoke about, that separates wheat from chaff. I have also come to bring **division** between people, splitting families right down the



middle,
father
against
son and mother against daughter ...
a likely reference to the book of Micah where the only safe and wise option is to trust not in friends or family but only in the Lord.



The reason for Jesus' strong prophetic message is twofold. First he has a **baptism** to be completed, a **mission** to fulfil. This is not water baptism but more likely a reference to his **death in Jerusalem**. In order to complete his mission, he must die and rise again, as he has explained several times to the bewildered disciples. Paul captures the urgency of this metaphor in the book of Romans when he compares baptism to death and rising again to new life lived in dedication to God. This is the baptism that occupies Jesus' attention.

But Jesus is also increasingly **frustrated** by the crowds who seem to delight in seeing him heal people but who are less keen to hear his prophetic message and change their ways. God's kingdom was bursting in with power and love, but the people couldn't or wouldn't see. Jesus calls them **hypocrites** – able to pick the weather but unable to see who Jesus really is and trust him enough to follow.

Jesus is basically highlighting the **choice** the crowds must make regarding **himself (slide)**. Do they perceive him as the long awaited Messiah bringing healing and restoration to Israel or do they reject Jesus as a misguided prophet who is leading Israel astray from its Law and stirring up unnecessary trouble with Rome? They must decide one way or the other – and this decision will tear many families apart, as predicted near the start of Luke’s Gospel when Simeon predicts that Jesus will cause this very outcome, as illustrated many times over in the sequel, the book of Acts.



So what might it mean for us to run the race of faith (**slide**) and fix our eyes upon Jesus?



Running the race of faith ... together

For the writer of Hebrews, we are certainly meant to learn from the many heroes of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures, but to realise that it is **Jesus** who offers a new and better way. Jesus is our great High Priest and brother and is the source, inspiration and pattern of our faith. Following Jesus is like running a race and we mustn’t get distracted or discouraged. Rather we need to persevere in faith and trust God will equip us to stay on course. The rest of the letter gives practical examples of how to do this.

For Luke, there must be no sitting on the fence. **We need to make a choice, every day, who we will follow.** And the message from today's reading is that following Jesus whole-heartedly will almost certainly bring us into conflict with people who want to maintain the status quo ...

Jesus speaking as a prophet warns us that we may at times need to choose between following God's ways and family harmony, just as we must choose between worshipping God and worshipping money. And if we are to follow Jesus we cannot ignore injustice or compassion.

So on this challenging path that Jesus invites us to walk, we are called to bring good news to the poor. This means that it's not OK to give large tax cuts to the rich without increasing Newstart allowance for the very poor ...

Likewise, Jesus calls us to love our neighbour and then illustrates who is our neighbour by telling about the Samaritan. This means that it's not OK for Australia to assume we can carry on business as usual and ignore the plight of our Pacific island neighbours whose homes are at risk of being submerged by climate change ... If Jesus truly is the inspiration and source of our faith ... then we have a difficult race to run where we dare not keep silent.

Closer to home here at Croydon, we too have choices to make.

- How will we run the race of faith in partnership with ElishaCare as we seek to engage together in mission in our neighbourhood?
- How will we commit ourselves afresh to engage with families, young people, newcomers, local schools and the poor?
- And how will we follow the prophetic in-your-face disturbing Jesus, rather than the meek and mild illusion of who we'd prefer Jesus to be?

As we take these steps of faith, how will we also remember that our journey calls us to watch out and care **for one another** – again following the pattern of Jesus – even as we continue to fix our eyes on **Jesus** ...

the **beginning** and the **end** of our faith,

the **source** and **goal** of our faith,

and the one who **sustains** us along the way.

Amen.