Sermon for 20th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

i

“There’s no gain without the pain;” so intones the coach of every sport on the planet. The pain of training, the sacrificial dedication of time to prepare and the demands of the contest itself are unavoidable for those who want to be on the winning side. Was there ever a time before teams didn’t have to commit 110%?

The *Letter to the Hebrews* uses a sporting metaphor to encourage those of Jewish heredity to commit to the Christian faith.

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:1-2).

Jesus provides the ultimate example of being prepared to undergo the most severe pain in order to secure the greatest victory.

The author builds to this crescendo after a litany of Jewish heroes and heroines who also withstood terrible suffering in order to gain the ultimate prize. For seven days they marched around the city of Jericho before its walls tumbled down, others shut the mouth of lions (Daniel and Saul), quenched the fury of flames (Daniel), were tortured, flogged, chained in prison, sawn in two (Isaiah), put to death by the sword, were destitute and homeless, living like animals in caves and holes in the ground (David) – all these privations were endured in faith that their suffering would gain them the ultimate prize that God wished to bestow.

Yet now the ultimate prize stands before them – and they risk turning away from the opportunity to grasp it with both hands.

Why have the people endured so much for so long if now the kingdom which God promised to Abraham is being refused? Why have they prepared themselves for so long and at such a cost, if now they refuse to run the final lap of the race?

The *Letter to the Hebrews* is addressed to Jewish Christians who have already suffered much for the sake of their new faith, but who are in danger of relapsing into Judaism because of the relentless pains and tribulations their faith is causing them.

The *Letter* therefore urges them not to lose the final prize when they have already come so far and points out the superiority of Christ the Son, over Moses the prophet, the superiority of Christ’s eternal priesthood over that of the Aaronic priesthood, the efficacy of Christ’s removal of sin compared to the repetitious acts of the Day of Atonement.

Scholars vary as to who wrote the letter and to whom, but it is clearly inspired by Paul’s teaching and convincingly fits the situation in Jerusalem after James had been killed in AD62, when the Zionist movement was at its peak and persecutions of Christians in Palestine at its worst, but before the outbreak of the First Roman-Jewish War in AD66 which shifted the focus onto the greater enemy, Rome.

The *Letter* catches the Jerusalem Church at a crucial moment; people are having doubts; they are wondering whether following Christ is worth all the pain and social isolation. The *Letter* points out that they have already paid dearly to follow Christ and they should therefore complete the race they have begun – because victory in Christ is secured – whereas if they return to the Jewish fold – the price they pay may be more monumental still.

ii

Jesus is wrestling with this very same issue in the passage from Luke 12:49-52. He acknowledges that his coming will not bring peace, but division for his people; some will follow him and others will not; father will be set against son and mother against daughter. The social cohesion of the nation will be threatened.

This is not what Jesus **desires** for his people, but it will be the effect. From the beginning of his ministry there were those like the Herodians and the Pharisees who opposed him and plotted his downfall, even from the earliest of days in Galilee (Mark 3:6).

Jesus laments that people can read the meteorological signs better than the spiritual ones; they recognise that cloud coming in from the Mediterranean on the prevailing westerlies means rain and that a southerly blowing in across the Negev means intolerable heat, yet they are unable to see the kingdom of God which Jesus is establishing before their eyes (vv54-56).

The same terms apply here in the Gospel as we have already found in the *Letter to the Hebrews*: namely, that the promised glory comes only after suffering; the fire Jesus wishes to kindle on earth is the fire of the Holy Spirit, the fire of the love of God in our hearts. Such passionate faith, however, comes only after the baptism he has to undergo – baptism here being used to signify his death on the cross (vv49-50).

The dilemma the followers of Jesus have to face in *Hebrews* – whether to accept the pain involved in following Christ in a hostile world – or whether to take the apparently easier road by going along with the rest and ultimately face even greater loss – would have been no surprise to Jesus. He faced the same choice.

Only if he went through the baptism of death and suffering on the cross could he achieve the glory and win the prize he so desired – the Pentecostal fire of new faith, of a new covenant, in a new Israel.

iii

The waywardness of Israel was no new phenomenon in Jesus’ day. Isaiah faced the very same problem in his day as many other prophets have done in theirs.

Isaiah uses the image of the vineyard and the vine – taken as symbols for Israel, and featured in the temple in Jerusalem where a huge, golden vine entwined itself around the four columns at the entrance to the temple.

God has planted the vine on the hillside of Mount Zion, tended to its needs, provided all that it should require to produce fine wine – and yet there is none.

The vineyard will therefore be trampled and laid waste; it will be covered in briers and become a place of desolation.

In Isaiah of Jerusalem’s day, this fate befell the northern kingdom of Israel as it was swept away by the Assyrians – a punishment for their money-grubbing hypocrisy denounced by Amos and Hosea before him.

Isaiah’s song should have been a love song – but instead it shockingly opened a series of “woes” upon Judah in which the sins of the city are denounced.

Isaiah’s song is sung at a moment when the fate of the city hangs in the balance.

On this occasion, the city draws back from the edge of the precipice as Hezekiah leads the people in an act of repentance (2 Kings 19). Judah is saved – at least for the time being.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* arrived in Jerusalem many centuries later in similar circumstances: would they remain faithful to Christ despite the cost, or return to the specious security of the Jewish fold?

As the citizens of Isaiah’s day remained loyal and faithful, so the Christians of the first century AD also pulled back from the brink and remained largely faithful to Christ, despite the cost. But those that refused to follow Christ paid the greater price at the conclusion of their unsuccessful war against Rome. Jewish leaders were banned from the city and the temple remained in ruins; rabbinic Judaism was founded in Jamnia for this reason. Christians, however, were trusted by the Romans to re-enter the city.

It would be a mistake to think all this belongs in the history books.

Every generation faces the same dilemma, the same fateful choice: Should we continue to bear the cost of following Christ – or should we go with the way of the world? Which is ultimately the greater price to pay? Is the cost we pay to keep the Church alive ultimately worth it?

The question might have seemed over dramatic and rather false in the Europe of a few generations ago; but such is the challenge of modern secularism in the West, the rise of aggressive Islam in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, that many Christians today are facing this question in a starker form than they have done for several generations.

In Western societies the choice is to maintain a faith that is ridiculed as out of step with the modern era, or submit to the deadening effects of consumerism. It doesn’t seem much of a choice, at times, but do we or do we not still find life in all its enhanced glory in Jesus, or don’t we?

In some other nations the choice is bleaker still: do you choose death for staying with Christ, or a living death with Islamist fanatics? That choice is harder still – but essentially the same choice as faced by people in the days of Isaiah and of Jesus.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard – July 2015**