

14 August 2022

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

On Tuesday a friend sent me a little item that seems quite apt for today's readings. It is titled "Six Little Stories with Lots of Meanings", and the author is unknown. It goes like this:

1. *Once all the villagers decided to pray for rain. On the day of prayer, all the people gathered, but only one boy came with an umbrella. That is faith.*
2. *When you throw babies in the air, they laugh because they know you will catch them. That is trust.*
3. *Every night we go to bed without any assurance of being alive the next morning, but still we set the alarms to wake us up. That is hope.*
4. *We plan big things for tomorrow in spite of zero knowledge of the future. That is confidence.*
5. *We see the world suffering, but still we get married and have children. That is love.*
6. *On an old man's shirt was written the sentence 'I am not 80 years old; I am sweet 16 with 64 years of experience.' That is attitude.*

In Hebrews 11 we are treated to a lengthy list of people who are set out as exemplars of faith. The chapter begins with these words:

*What then is faith? It is what gives assurance to our hopes; it is what gives us conviction about things we cannot see. (Heb 1:1)<sup>1</sup>*

The letter's writer has been calling those to whom he has written to persevere in the faith. Now he goes on to describe what he means by faith, and to set out a brief history of God's people. The writer surveys a great sweep of people, beginning soon after creation with Abel and Cain, and moving through key figures in Israel's history, especially Abraham and Moses. In this morning's reading the momentum

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright's translation found in *Hebrews*, p.126

builds in increasingly staccato sentences<sup>2</sup>, moving all the way through to Jesus and to the writer's own time.<sup>3</sup>

“Faith, in Hebrews, is always closely linked to hope. Faith is looking at God and trusting him for everything, while hope is looking at the future and trusting God for it. As we see in verse 1, Hebrews actually defines faith in relation to hope: it's one thing to have a hope, but when you have faith underneath it gives assurance. I may hope for a better world, for a new bodily life beyond the grave; but unless I believe in the God who raised Jesus, my hope may degenerate into mere optimism.”<sup>4</sup>

But to properly understand faith we need to go further still, to the one boy with his umbrella. Faith “is not a general religious attitude to life. It's not simply believing difficult or impossible things for the sake of it, as though simple credulity was itself a virtue. The faith in question, as becomes increasingly clear throughout the chapter, is the faith which hears and believes the promise of God”<sup>5</sup> and which *acts* as a result – the faith that prays for rain and brings an umbrella in readiness for the prayer's answer.

So we have this great chapter of examples of people of faith from history. But Hebrews is not just history: the writer urges his readers to live within the story for themselves:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw of everything that hinders us 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. (Heb 12:1-2a)*

We can imagine the Christian life as being something like the Commonwealth Games marathon. As we run our life's race we find ourselves cheered on by those who have finished already. We are surrounded by their encouragement and enthusiasm, and by their demonstration that the race can indeed be finished; they are willing us on, looking for us too to safely finish.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Holmes

<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Hebrews*, 127-128

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Hebrews*, 128

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Hebrews*, 133.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Hebrews*, 148

But there are some things we must do ensure we complete this marathon.

First, we must get rid of the heavy weights we carry around – anxieties about trivial concerns, ambitions to use the gospel or the church as a means of self-advancement, resentments at other people, the possessiveness that possesses us, and so on. And we must ensure that the way ahead is clear, so that our path is not obstructed by unforgiven sin in our own lives and in the church.

Second, we need patience and perseverance: this is a marathon, not a sprint. The Christian life is a day-by-day faithfulness and gradual process of transformation. It is not the case that we get converted or baptised and treat it like graduation, as if there is nothing more to do. Through persistence, through getting up again after the inevitable set-backs, we will eventually make the finish line.

Finally, we need to keep our eyes, our spiritual imagination, fixed on the finishing line and the one who is at the centre of the cloud of witnesses, waiting there to greet us himself. *Jesus* ran this course before us. In fact, he pioneered the way, opened up the course and brought it to a successful completion. Our task is to follow in his steps.<sup>7</sup>

But let us not get too quickly carried away yet with the idea of the elation of finishing, the congratulations, the medal ceremony, the victory parties. We need to look more closely at what is said about the course *Jesus* ran – which is the course we to must run:

*For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners ....* (Heb 12:2b-3a)

If our marathon follows the way of *Jesus*, then it will involve suffering: standing against the ways of the world inevitably does.

And actually, if we read carefully back over Hebrews 11 we find that those counted among the great cloud of witnesses had no walk in the park either: there is mention here of lions, flames, and swords; mention of torture, jeers and flogging, chains and imprisonment, stoning and sawing-in-two; there is mention of great poverty, persecution, and mistreatment.

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<sup>7</sup> The foregoing is adapted from Wright, *Hebrews*, 148-149

Reviewing this history was important for the audience of the letter to the Hebrews. They were a people facing threats, persecution, intimidation and mockery from their contemporaries. And it is easy, when faced with this kind of thing, to lose heart and to grow weary. So they are encouraged to keep going, and to constantly remind themselves of those who have gone before them – and above all, to remind themselves of the *One* who has gone before them. This is not a case of feelings: rather, it is a case of reminding oneself, constantly, of the truth. It is a case of the *attitude* we adopt; and, because it is built on faith in our faithful God, it is an attitude that carries a great deal more heft to it than a tee-shirt declaring “sweet 16 with 64 years of experience”!

Part way through the writer’s list of persecutions and sufferings he comments that they suffered such things because “the world was not worthy of them”. These people were out of tune with their times because they were living by faith in God’s future world while society all around them was living as though the present world was all there was or ever would be. That God gives the strength to live in this way proves the truth of their claim that God is making a new world in which everything would be better. And the world that despises them and makes them suffer demonstrates that it is not worthy of these people who are part of the beginning of the new world.<sup>8</sup>

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Jesus said

*I have come to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. (Luke 12:49-51)*

This seems to contradict what we understand of the character and mission of Jesus. Wasn’t he all about reconciliation and peace?

Well, yes he was. But that is precisely the point. If Jesus has come to proclaim and enact reconciliation and peace among people who are of different minds on the need

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Hebrews*, 145. 146

for this or about the means of going about it, then of course Jesus is going to bring division. If Jesus has come to proclaim, and indeed to *be*, the King of Kings, then the populace will be divided over their loyalties.

Jesus didn't come to seek division for division's sake. But if his message meant anything at all then division would be the natural result because it requires *decision*.<sup>9</sup> When Jesus talks about father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother, and so on, he is loosely quoting Micah 7:6, a passage in which the prophet is warning of a looming crisis and urging the people that the only way ahead for them lies in complete trust in God: family loyalties won't cut it when your very salvation is at stake.

On one level Jesus was preaching against an attitude and approach in Israel that would leave her fatally vulnerable to the power of Rome. He could see the storm clouds brewing; he could anticipate the devastating consequences of Israel, having failed to take up its vocation as the light to the nations, now failing to heed his call to the way of peace. Sadly, Israel was locked in her ways and unheeding to what was really going on around them. They could interpret the signs in the regional weather patterns, but could not see what was going in the world – the occupation by Rome, the oppressive reign of Herod and his cronies as puppets of Rome, the self-interest of the wealthy and arrogant high priests, the exclusive agendas of the Pharisees. In the middle of this ferment comes Jesus, a young prophet announcing the coming of *God's* kingdom and making it visible through acts of healing and deliverance.<sup>10</sup>

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From Hebrews to Luke this all might seem a bit remote for us. But the message is in fact just as important for us today.

We need to be interpreting the signs of the times, understanding what is going on in the world around us. We see a society that has greater and greater technology for communication but in which people feel increasingly isolated. We see a society in which our young people who identify as Christian find themselves at risk of being

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<sup>9</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 531

<sup>10</sup> Wright, *Luke*, 159

“cancelled” from participating in their social media groups; a society in which politicians who wish to acknowledge their belief in Christ are then challenged to disavow that their belief makes any difference to their policy decisions. We see a world in which division is increasing, driven by tribalism, greed, power, and the outworking of the long legacy of the abuses perpetrated by one people on another. We see a world in which it is increasingly difficult to ask questions or to state a point of view about a moral concern without being silenced with the charge of intolerance.

Jesus says he came to bring division. We need to distinguish between the division that is the natural consequence of faithfulness to the gospel cause, its message and its methods, and the division caused by matters of much lesser consequence. Jesus brings the first kind of division, and seeks to reconcile divisions of the latter kind. The world seems to be trying to put things around the other way: trying to keep the peace by making faith commitments, ultimate commitments, irrelevant, but dividing again and again over more trivial matters.

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On Friday morning, as Christine and I shared morning prayer in my study, she received an unexpected impression from God. It was just a snatch of melody, and she couldn't bring the rest of the tune to mind and couldn't think of the words. I recognised it instantly and felt it exceedingly apt to Jesus' words to us today:

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence  
and with fear and trembling stand;  
ponder nothing earthly-minded,  
for with blessing in his hand  
Christ, our God, to earth descending,  
comes our homage to command.*

Homage, loyalty, to Christ means that we will, like Christ himself, end up causing division. Let us ensure that the *only* division we cause is the natural outworking of complete loyalty to him and his message, for his message is reconciliation between peoples and between God and humankind.

And as division occurs, we will inevitably find ourselves facing persecution. Let us ensure that we nevertheless run with perseverance the race set before us, knowing that as we do so we add our part of the story to that of the great cloud of witnesses.

**Sources:**

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