

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

THE RACE

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Sunday 13th June 2010

Hebrews ch.11 v.1-7; ch.12 v.1-13

Discipline. I wonder what you think of when you hear that word? You may think of self-discipline, denying yourself pleasures until the hard work is done. You may think of school days when the rule of the teacher was enforced with the taws. You may think of your parents trying to help you to grow up to be a strong and useful person, and you may remember that at the time their discipline didn't always feel nice and helpful, and wasn't always welcomed with thanks by you.

What of God's discipline? Surely that's the side of God that most people fear and back away from - the stern deity punishing us for the good of our souls. And surely that's what Jesus came to free us from, so that we can be God's children and not fear him. Isn't it? Or is it? Jesus came to free us from the shrinking away from God in fear that people of other faiths can still feel. He came to tell us that God is our Father who loves us. But fathers who love their children don't leave them with no guidance and no discipline. That wouldn't be good parenting.

When you were little and was particularly naughty, did your mother ever say to you "Wait till Daddy gets home and hears about this." And you would wait. With some trepidation. I wonder if that feeling of waiting made you fear your father? Possibly, but I hope not deeply or lastingly. If she used words like that, what your mother may have been saying is "This is too big or bad or troubling for me to make the only judgement. I need to consult." Waiting for your father may even have played in your favour, as your mother would have had time to get some distance from your misdeed and some perspective on it. But you knew that there would be a consequence of some kind.

We need to learn that our actions have consequences, and becoming God's children doesn't change that. What we do affects who we are, and affects other people. Good parents help us to understand that. If you see a child who is either spoilt or out of control, you wonder at the parents - don't they care? Don't they have the discipline to temper their love with restraint, or their selfishness with love?

We are God's children and Jesus is our brother. And God cares. So he will correct us when we go wrong. He will allow us difficult times and testing times and tiring times - painful times which we would rather avoid, because he wants us to accept his training and learn to walk his way.

But we are not alone in all this. The whole of chapter 11, which is many people's favourite chapter in the entire letter, is a litany of people from Old Testament times who are held up as examples of faith.

There is Abel, who offered his sacrifice to God with faith, so it was acceptable; Enoch who was said not to have died but to have been taken to be with God - which would only happen if he was a man of faith. There is Noah, with faith to build that ark. Then there is Abraham. He is in many ways a byword for faith (though if you read his story you will find that there were times when he didn't act in faith: what of the birth of Ishmael?). Abraham's faith was showed most clearly when he had learned to trust God for a son, despite his and Sarah's advanced age and childless condition. All these great men of faith.

And then the writer pauses in his litany to remind us that these are people who believed God's promises but died before seeing them fulfilled. They were people - and he may well be thinking especially of Abraham here, because he hasn't finished with that man - who didn't look back, but pressed onwards, to new things, looking for God to lead them. And so, we are told, "God is not ashamed to be called their God." (11:16). What a statement. God is not ashamed of these servants, these faithful people. Wouldn't you like that to be said about you? Well, you need to accept discipline and live with faith.

The writer returns to Abraham to remind us of how his faith was prepared even to give up his only son Isaac, although he had been told that the promise of a new nation would come through him. Abraham never questioned that God knew best. He believed that God could do more than he could imagine. And so Isaac himself caught that ideal of faith and is commended for the visionary blessing he bestowed on Jacob and Esau. Jacob, after a life of vicissitude, came to be a man of faith, and his son Joseph had faith in God's promise so that when he died in Egypt, with his whole extended family settled there, he made them promise to take his bones with them when God led them to the promised land.

The story of faith continues with Moses - hidden by his mother through faith, choosing his own people rather than the life of an Egyptian prince, and through faith becoming the leader of his people in the events of the exodus.

Lots of faithful people to inspire us. And there are more, but the writer runs out of breath, or paper or something here. He only hints at the next generation of faithful people - and that's a pity because if you read the book of Judges the first thing to strike you about some of those named might not be their faith. Gideon - OK, yes, once he learned to trust God he did quite well. Barak - he only had faith if Deborah the prophetess would come with him. Samson? Jephthah - who ended up sacrificing his daughter? Men of faith? The writer to the Hebrews' contention seems to be that if God could use them there must have been faith there, even if it wasn't fully developed in every part of life. He names too David - who had faith, most of the time. And Samuel. And then he hints at others. You can discern the stories of Daniel and the lions den, and the three men in the fiery furnace in his hints. You can see the widow whose son Elijah restored to life. There are hints at some of the stories of martyrdom during the time of the Maccabean revolts against the Seleucid dynasty that preceded the Roman occupation of Israel.

The world was not worthy of these people of faith. They were prepared to take a lot of disciplining, *but* they did not receive what was promised. Not then. And the point is, if they could undergo all the discipline which faith requires, not turning aside from God when things became difficult, and still not see the fulfilment of the promises which came with Jesus, how much more reason have we to persevere in our faith.

The other week when I ran the Laggan 10k for most of the distance there was no one to watch us - one person hanging over a farm gate; the three helpers at the turn around point. But at the end, as you approached the finish, even at my position well down the field, there were people clapping and cheering and urging you onwards. We should never think that we run the race of the Christian life alone, that no one knows when we make the daily decisions to live by faith which quietly affect our lives, when we accept the discipline of our heavenly Father, who loves us. Even your closest friend or spouse might not know the half of what goes on in your life of faith, but still you are surrounded by a crowd of witnesses. All the people of faith who have gone before us are there, cheering us on.

You may have a Biblical hero, or a hero from church history, or a Christian example of someone you have known who has now entered God's presence. Thinking about these people can really help us. In their best context, that is what veneration of saints or martyrs in other Christian traditions is about - getting encouragement and inspiration for our own life of faith. They are cheering for you.

Recently the three local schools had their sports day, which was a lot of fun. Towards the end of the afternoon came the nursery race. All the pre-schoolers lined up to run. During the other competitions the parents had stood at the side and watched, but for the nursery race the parents stood at the finish line, so that the toddlers ran each to their own mum or dad.

We are surrounded by encouraging witnesses, but we are asked to fix our eye, not on them, though their example can inspire, but on Jesus. We are to run straight to Jesus. Jesus who is the author of our faith, the one who makes our faith perfect through all that he did for us. If it weren't for Jesus, we, who are not Jews, not Hebrews, would have no faith, so he is the author. If it weren't for Jesus living out his own perfect faith in God then we would not have been given the gift of his faith, the gift which included his death for us and his resurrection, we would not have been allowed to inherit his perfect faith.

Our writer wants to strengthen our faith and he knows that the best way to do this is to have us consider Jesus. The more we look to him, the more we want to be like him, the more we want to be worthy of him, the more we want God not to be ashamed of us either. And so if we have discipline to undergo, well, so be it. Jesus endured the cross. Discipline shows that God loves us. And so we should lift our drooping, weary hands and strengthen our weak knees. The race isn't over yet, and if we run it God's way, even when that is hard, then we will come to know his healing and his peace. Look to Jesus and he will give you strength.

Amen.