

Sunday 29th August 2021

1 Cor 15:1-7, Heb 12:1-3 (Pass on the baton)

Talk by Ian Baldwin, Prayers by Betty Friend

Good morning and welcome to our service my name is Ian and today we will be thinking about how we should prepare ourselves to pass on the gospel.

A prayer: Father God we ask your Holy Spirit be with us as we hear your word and celebrate your love for us. Amen.

Now Betty will lead us in our intercessions then I will read our bible passage before speaking.

Prayers

Almighty Father,

We give you thanks and praise for your grace and blessings. In the name of your son Jesus, we bring our requests to you, confident that you hear and answer our prayers.

Lord, we pray for our world where so many places seem to be in a state of chaos on top of the continuing covid pandemic. For Afghanistan, where thousands are terrified of what will happen under the Taliban. For Haiti, where hundreds of people have been killed and injured as the result of an earthquake, followed by a tropical storm. For huge swathes of Turkey, Greece, Italy, Canada and America which have been engulfed by wild fires.

Father we ask your comfort for those who have been bereaved, lost their homes and livelihoods, and those who are now refugees fleeing for their lives. Have mercy Lord.

We continue to pray for those who are still suffering in many countries which have now fallen off the media radar. We ask your protection on our persecuted brothers and sisters, thinking especially of those in India and in Nigeria where Christians were attacked recently, with two churches, an orphanage and homes burnt down. Fifty villagers were killed, and a number of orphans were taken. Lord we pray that you will move the heart of the Nigerian government that it will send forces to protect these villages. We pray too for the peace of Jerusalem.

Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.

We pray for our own country as covid restrictions are lifted. We thank you that the vaccines have resulted in less deaths, but we pray for those who are still losing loved ones to this awful disease. As we move forward, I pray that those who have lost their jobs will find other employment. We ask for wisdom for our members of parliament and local councillors that they will make fair decisions on how their budgets should be spent. Give Christian parliamentarians and councillors the courage to speak your truth.

Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.

We pray for our church family here at St. John's soon to welcome our new vicar Jessica, and to merge with Holy Trinity. We pray your blessing on this merger, that the new church will be a

beacon of light in Penge as we seek to serve the local community. We thank you for those projects already established, and those such as Little Fish which we will hopefully be restarted in September. We pray for Rachel, Lin and Gareth as they have a summer break for CAP, and ask that they will return refreshed and eager to help those seeking a way out of debt. During these school holidays we pray for safety for children and strength and patience for parents, especially those struggling financially.

We ask your blessing on those suffering physically, mentally or spiritually, those feeling isolated, lonely and afraid at this time, and pray that your Holy Spirit will bring them relief and comfort.

Let us take a moment to remember those known personally to us.

Finally, we bring our prayers together in the prayer that Jesus taught us,

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

Readings

1Cor 15:1-7

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

Heb 12:1-3

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 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, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Talk

From our reading in Hebrews it is clear that we do not act alone. There has gone before us thousands of people who have been witnesses to the life and death of Jesus Christ. They have shown that the race can be run and that Jesus is true to his word. Through the generations the message of the gospel has been passed on and this is what made me think about the image of the athlete that Jon spoke of last week but I want to continue on that theme and look at the teamwork involved and in particular a relay team.

A team needs a goal otherwise all the effort has no purpose no aim and is pointless. The first aim is to get round with the baton, then to win the race, and then to be champions. Now any team has to practice and train so that they understand what they are doing and how best to carry out the task. They will be inspired by great teams of the past and present. For a relay team it is important that each individual tries their best to be fit and ready to race but also to know the person they are handing the baton to. There is a sense of all being in it together and of collective responsibility. These are qualities that should be seen at work in a church. They must also accept that they may be in the team or they may be a reserve. Whichever they are they are still part of the team and need to be ready to step in when required.

Now our aim as Christians is explained in Heb 12 v2 “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” We must run the course set before us inspired by the life of Jesus and the Christians who have lived before us. In Acts ch20v24 Paul writes about his aim “ I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace”. So, however we witness for God we should have the same aim.

So how do we prepare for our Christian race that God has set before us?

Well for a start by being part of team St John’s. Coming to church to be with others and learning and worshipping together is important in building our faith and fellowship. Then there is bible reading either on your own or with others which is where home-groups are useful. And there is prayer which again can be on your own or part of a group. We read and learn and pray at church because it is important and as Paul writes in 2Tim4v16 “it is for our training in righteousness so that the people of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”.

A relay team has to persevere. There will be hard work and early starts and time in the gym. It will not all be glory for there will be defeat, and mistakes and injury. But an athlete must bounce back which takes grit and determination and patience. There may be things which they don’t particularly enjoy but for the team you take part.

Well how does a Christian persevere. Hebrews 12v1 “let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” That means putting aside the things we think we need but actually we don’t need for the task in hand.

It also means there will be times when it is hard or uncomfortable. Like coming to a cold church building or going out to meeting when it is raining. Going to learn or pray when you are tired or just don’t fancy turning up. In Gal 5 it says “You were running superbly! Who cut in on you, deflecting you from the true course of obedience? This detour doesn’t come from the One who called you into the race in the first place”.

So don't grow weary or lose heart but like an athlete press on to the finish line. Patiently working at it to find a solution to the things which take you away from God. God does honour our effort. I expect a lot of people can testify to going to a service or meeting, when actually you would rather stay at home, yet it is at such a meeting where you have been touched by God in some way. I give an example of coming home from work tired and going straight out visiting someone in hospital. I was not in the best of moods yet having seen how grateful they were and being able to speak with them and to pray with them it feels a privilege. I felt blessed in doing that small thing.

Another example I remember is when Val and I were going to a midweek meeting during a mission and not really being bothered, neither of us quite fancying the speaker, but going out of duty. Yet at that meeting we received some amazing prayer ministry which really helped us as a couple. Often God works when we least expect we are just called to be obedient.

Now, without doubt, the most important thing for a relay team is to get the baton round without dropping it. The baton has to be passed on successfully. This takes knowledge and practice to handle and run with the baton and understand how to hand it on.

Paul wrote in 1Cor 15v3 "for what I received I passed on to you of first importance" which we know is the gospel. Our job as a church and individuals is to ensure the gospel is passed on to the next generation. Paul continues to explain what he passed on "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

So we have to train so that we understand what God has done for us in Jesus, that it is not our ideas but the bible and that it is witness accounts of his life. There are many ways for us to witness to the gospel, explaining it, answering questions or living it out. Whichever way we do this the important thing to remember is that in passing on the baton, as it were, the person receiving has to have a firm grasp. They may not agree with you or understand fully the gospel but they must grasp the basic facts of the gospel message. How else can they make a decision?

Now a relay team may consist of four runners and a couple of reserves but behind them is a large team. Trainers, physiotherapists, dieticians, psychologists, doctors, kit providers, sponsors. Often these people are not seen but are a very important part of the team for without them the team could not race.

Our Church is a team and as we come together with Holy Trinity we will have to work at becoming one big team. This Church of St Johns functions because a lot goes on behind the bit you see here on Sunday morning. There are a whole range of ways to serve in order for this building and the church family to function. Many people are involved but there are gaps meaning some are overstretched and things don't get done or not as well as they should. You see without each other we cannot function as the body of Jesus Christ which is the church. However we must always remember that all our efforts must be founded on Jesus, soaked in prayer and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

There was an email sent out earlier this month asking for help. So I ask - where do you fit in the team? What part will you play in passing on the gospel? What training do you need to help? What do you think God wants you to do? Or are we to be the generation that drops the baton and doesn't pass on the gospel.

Well, we began with the image of a crowd of witnesses who have gone before but these faithful people are also an encouragement to us. We do not travel alone for Jesus promised to be with us and by the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. Therefore as team St Johns let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds - Heb 10v24. As we run the race set before us our desire should be to say with Paul in 2Tim 4v7 " I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day".

Amen

A closing prayer from Numbers 6:24,

May the Lord bless you and protect you.

May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord show you his favour and give you his peace.'

Amen.

Thank you for taking the time to read or listen and may God bless you this week in these coming days.