

Sunday 8th September – Hebrews 3:1-14 ‘Holding fast to Jesus’

Like many of you, I love watching the Olympics and the Paralympics, which draws to a close this weekend. I'm glad it's only every four years, because it retains that sense of being something unique and special. Truthfully, once you've watched dressage, water polo and archery a few times during the two-week binge-fest of smaller sports, you remember why you only want to watch them every four years – but for all that, the Olympics seems to symbolise something good about humanity, not least because most of its competitors are not the multi-millionaires that grace – or disgrace – our TV screens the rest of the time.

There were many highlights for me in Paris: the obvious ones like Alex Yee's remarkable charge to the line in the last 500m and Keely of course in the stadium, the 50-yr-old skateboarder and the utter craziness of the BMX racing and stunt events – watching a guy take not just his hands but his feet off the pedals 20-ft up in the air takes a particular form of adrenaline-rush insanity. But one of the events I enjoyed watching most this time was the climbing, and of course the amazing gold won for Britain by 19-year old Toby Roberts. Watching the elite climbers hang off the wall by their fingertips, armed with nothing but a bit of chalk in their pocket, was astonishing. The wall itself wasn't just vertical, it actually leant over by about 15-20% so they were literally suspended in mid-air for seconds at a time. Yet somehow, they swung their legs and lifted an arm to grab the next hold and make it up the wall.

As I prepared for this Sunday, watching them hanging on for dear life came back to my mind as a pretty good description of the journey of faith at certain points. There are times when it feels straightforward: walking contentedly in a lush valley of blessing. But **there are times for pretty much all of us, when following Jesus feels like trying to hang on to a great slab of rock by our fingertips.** (It's why I used the image I did on the front slide, and the reading slide.) And, yes, Jesus is that Rock – the same yesterday, today and forever – but for all that, we're clinging on.

The recipients of the original letter to the Hebrews certainly felt like they were clinging on by their fingertips. They were under severe pressure to give up, and as we saw last week, the author's purpose is to give them lots of reasons not to: to keep holding on, to keep holding fast to Jesus, the Saviour who always holds fast to us. Chapter 1 began by reminding them that Jesus is the exact representation of God in human form, and is greater than all other heavenly beings.

Chapter 2 (which we've skipped, so here's a quick summary) tells us that this Jesus both announced God's salvation and also confirmed it with miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Crucially, he also suffered in order to win our salvation. We'll think about this more next week, but writer is reminding his readers that their suffering is not unique, their Saviour went there first. Ultimately, Jesus *had* to become a human being because he couldn't win our salvation any other way – as v17 of ch2 says: 'For this reason he had to be made like them [i.e. humans], in order that he might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God (more on that too next week), and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.'

Therefore – and this begins our passage for today, at which point we always ask: what is a 'therefore' there for – how do we respond? **'Fix your thoughts on Jesus.'** **Why? Because he is our apostle and high priest.** Apostle means 'sent one' and priest means 'mediator' – so God sent his Son Jesus to us, to put things right between us and God. Lots of people have tried to be one or the other. There are lots of people claiming to be sent by God to speak truth and wisdom, and there are lots of other people who act as priests in their religion. Nobody but Jesus does both – nobody is both divinely sent to announce the truth of God and offers divine intervention on behalf of that truth. That is why he's the one person to cling on to at all costs.

The person in human history who got closest to that dual role was Moses. Moses was both appointed by God to speak to the people, and after the escape from Egypt temporarily acted as an intermediary between God and his people. So, the writer pre-empts the one objection his Jewish readers would have made to his argument by reminding them that Moses was a *servant*, Jesus was a *Son*. Moses served the house of God, but Jesus built it! So not even Moses can match the glory of Jesus, the true apostle and priest of God.

At this point we get to the first climax of the letter – there are a few of these, as the writer takes stock and hammers their point home. Let’s remember that **the reason for this letter is to encourage a small, fragile, discouraged group of Christians to keep going, not to give up.** And, for all the high-flown theology they use to make the point, they keep coming back to the basic message: listen, keep going, don’t give up!

And for this first ‘keep going’ message, the writer uses a very famous Psalm which has a special place in the worshipping life of the Jewish faith: it is one of those appointed for the start of the Sabbath, which is a foundational part of life as a Jew – entering the rest of God weekly. In fact, this Psalm has a special place in Christian worship too, being part of the liturgy for morning prayer since the earliest times. Using this Psalm, which any Jewish follower of Jesus would have known off by heart, the writer is bound to grab their attention. The first half of Psalm 95 is a call to worship God, but interestingly, the writer doesn’t use that bit – you could argue that the letter up to this point is his or her call to worship God. It’s the second half of the psalm the writer quotes: **‘Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’**

In other words: listen up! This is your exodus moment. Psalm 95 reminds God’s people that despite all the wonderful things the Lord did for them, rescuing them from Egypt and providing for them in the desert, the people still disobeyed God, they still doubted His goodness, they still complained loudly and frequently. Their hearts forgot all this, and they gave up on God.

And the writer is saying: come on guys, you know all this stuff, don’t make the same mistake! Don’t stop believing in the Lord, don’t turn away, don’t harden your heart to God. You might be clinging on by your fingertips, but the Rock isn’t moving, and God will strengthen those fingertips so you can keep clinging on.

It’s notable that the writer uses two words in this passage to describe the nature of our faith: v6 ‘confidence’ and v14 ‘conviction’. Faith is not a blind leap in the dark. We’ll have to wait a few weeks before we get to the famous verse: ‘Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see,’ but the idea runs like a golden thread through the whole letter. Faith isn’t just hedging our bets or hoping for the best, faith in Jesus is something we can be confident about. It’s a ‘conviction’ – a deep inner decision – which not only do we have individually, it’s something we share with all our fellow Christian sisters and brothers. v14: ‘We have come to share in Christ’. Faith is not just a private battle, it’s a shared journey, it’s family with whom we are knit together for eternity.

So, the writer gives us all one very simple but powerful piece of advice, and here’s where I want to land today. Yes, let’s feast on the theology and expand our minds, yes, let’s take the warning not to give up to heart – but **let’s also hear this word: v13: ‘Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “today”!’**

The gift of encouragement is probably the most under-rated of all the spiritual gifts – and it is called a spiritual gift in Romans. **The world needs more encouragers.** If you know someone who particularly has this gift, you’ll know what I mean. Encouragers are like gold in any community. They quite often don’t have a big upfront role, but they quietly get alongside people and build them up. It is said that for a healthy psyche we need ten pieces of praise for every one piece of criticism – and for most of us, we probably feel like it’s the other way around. Too much stick and not enough carrot!

How we need to exercise the gift of encouragement! And the writer reminds us of three simple principles about this gift: first it’s **deliberate**. We need to share encouragements with each other, don’t just assume someone else will do it. Second, it’s **frequent**. The writer actually says ‘daily’ – how many of us ever do that? When was the last time you went out of your way to thank or praise someone, or approached a specific person to give them something to lift their hearts? If you remember one thing today, make a note to try and encourage someone, anyone, every day. And finally, it’s **permanent**. There isn’t a time when we don’t need to encourage each other any more! As long as we use the word ‘today’ to describe this day, do it. Never tire of encouraging people. We all need the carrot more than the stick.

So as I close, if you feel prompted to encourage someone, go and do it! And if you’re clinging on by your fingertips, hold on. Jesus is worth it. The decision we made is worth it. There is a whole community clinging on, just like you. And may God grant you an encourager, today and every day. Amen.