

HOMILY 14/08/2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight: O Lord my strength and redeemer.

Today I would like to follow on from Rev Roxanne's homily last week, with a focus on the letter to the Hebrews, particularly Chapter 12:2. Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

The image of the race has been at the forefront of my mind during the past couple of weeks as I have been watching the Commonwealth Games, and especially the longer events such as the 1500 metres freestyle, and the marathon. Using the analogy of the marathon this morning I would like to explore the race of faith as it is presented in Letter to the Hebrews.

But first a recap of Rev Roxanne's homily from last week. You will recall the following verse: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" which is the opening verse of chapter 11. And then through chapter 11 the writer of Hebrews lists people of faith such as Abel, Enoch, Noah. Then Abraham the great patriarch who set out at God's command not knowing where he was going. Chapter 11 continues on with Moses who refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, and threw in his lot with the illtreated people of God and led them to the promised land.

Today Hebrews 11 continues from v 29 by naming other people of faith such as Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David and Samuel.

But chapter 11 then takes on a dark tone when it speaks of others who were tortured, stoned to death, killed by the sword, persecuted tormented. It makes for gruesome reading. Why would the writer of

Hebrews go into such detail? And why would the writer say of those who had suffered: “yet all of these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect”

Because Jesus had not yet been born lived died and rose again.

The Letter to the Hebrews was written for Christian people, who were either Jewish or had an awareness of Judaism, who were struggling with the challenges of the Christian life, rejection, persecution, suffering. Those same people could well have been muttering, our lives as Christians are no better, perhaps worse than they were before we accepted Jesus.

So the writer is at pains to emphasise and promise that if you have perseverance you will reach the finish line. The prize at the finish line will be eternal life with Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus is the pioneer because he, who has gone to prepare a place has himself run the race.

During his three years of ministry Jesus ran into all kinds of obstacles: doubting members of his own extended family, the opposition of the religious authorities, his disciples who time and again failed to understand his message of service, and who when Jesus needed them most, on the night before he died, fled in fear. And of course the next day Jesus endured ridicule, mocking, flogging, and ultimately crucifixion.

Jesus is the pioneer of our faith because he has gone before us. Jesus struggled on, never gave up, even when he felt most alone “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” Jesus is the pioneer of our faith because he crossed the finish line. He received the prize of sitting at the right hand of his Father. The writer of Hebrews is saying that eternal life is also ours if we are prepared to continue to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, which is the Christian life.

I also like how Jesus is described as the perfecter of our faith. If our faith is intimately linked to the race that is set before us, i.e. the Christian life, then Jesus is something of a sporting coach, even a life coach. He is the coach that ran the gruelling race, who knows the struggle, who knows what is needed to keep striving towards the finish line.

Just for a moment imagine the marathon runner. Before the race he or she will have spent many hours with the coach. They will have trained together, the coach will have advised the runner to run your own race. Keep a steady rhythm. Focus on your breathing. And then at a particular time or distance in the race to change the tempo. The words of the coach will be in the head of the runners as they pound the asphalt.

Jesus is our coach and his words can be alive within us if we read and pray his word in the Bible. The message of Jesus can guide us along the path. Jesus, when on this earth spent time in quiet prayer with his father. And Jesus encourages us to do the same, so that we are spiritually ready to continue on the race, particularly when the going gets tough and our energy levels drop.

I wonder is it possible to run a bad race if we are following Jesus? Now I know that everyone of us has our regrets. What if? If I had only made that decision, or had not made that choice then my life would have been different. I hope that we do not spend our energies regretting what has happened. And I say that for a reason. When we run with perseverance the race it is not that Jesus is at the starting blocks saying on your way, find your way home.

No, Jesus is with us all the way until we reach the finish line. So at any time during the race we can encounter Christ who is with us.

I wonder what does a Christian person who is running the race look like. I would like to think that all of us here are running a good race.

But if we were to join the throng at an AFL game would we be able to spot those who are running the race. I am not sure.

For some reason three people came to mind when I was thinking about those running the good race. The first of these was mum's first cousin Mary, who some years ago went to God. Mary had a good husband and six children. Three of those children were of above average intelligence. Three of the children had intellectual disabilities of varying degrees. One of the children, named John was permanently in out of home care. Two of the children Michael and Maureen lived at home with Mary and her husband Jack. At times the burden of caring for her children was overwhelming for Mary and she experienced bouts of depression. But Mary was a committed catholic who attended Mass on Sundays and every Friday said special prayers for her children. It was prayer that assisted her to persevere when the going became excruciating. To my then young eyes Mary looked holy.

The second person who comes to mind I do not even remember her name. But I met this woman during a home gathering in a parish in Perth during the mid 1990s. I remember this woman's appearance. Her face was deeply etched, a face that had seen a lot of life and much suffering. Yet this woman's eyes spoke to me of someone who had been touched by the compassion of a loving God. This woman shared how for many years she had been in an abusive marriage before finally leaving. She tried to get any annulment but the church authorities in Perth refused her. So this woman struggled for many years as a single person before meeting a man. She decided to marry him according to her conscience, but could not do so within a catholic church because her first marriage was still considered valid by the catholic church. So she went against the official church but made a decision according to her conscience. Her face and her story revealed a woman at peace after struggling for so long.

The third person was my neighbour of many years, Jack. Jack married Margaret and they started a family up in country Victoria. Early in his life Jack received some land as an inheritance but was cheated in some business dealing and lost it. Along with Margaret and their three children, they came to Geelong, to Hamlyn Heights and started afresh. Jack was a man of faith and a man of action. Even at the age of 92 he would climb a ladder and prune my parents' fruit trees. A few years ago I had the privilege of attending Jack's 100th birthday. And I remember Jack's face. He had such a peaceful face, a beautiful face, a light filled face. And I thought to myself if my face is as contented as Jack when I am 90 or 100 then I will be satisfied that I have persevered and run the good race.

I am certain that these three people have all gone to God and have joined the cloud of witnesses along with our loved ones in the presence of God. They eagerly await us joining them when we have finished the race.

Let us pray.

Loving God we thank you for being a God who understands our sufferings and struggles. As we run with perseverance the race that is set before us, may we always be aware that you are our constant guide strengthening us and showing us the way. We make this prayer in Jesus's name, Amen.