

THE TEXT

HEBREWS 11:29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days. ³¹By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. ³²And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ³⁷They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated--³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. ⁴⁰God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

^{12:1}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. ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

SERMON

Hasn't the Commonwealth Games made for extraordinary viewing, as we have proudly watched from our lounge-rooms and cheered our athletes on in their victorious campaign!! **NEXT SLIDE** One of the iconic images from the Commonwealth Games was of Australian athlete Jess Stenson who triumphed in the Birmingham marathon, and, exhausted, hugged her son at the finish line. **NEXT SLIDE** This was a 42 kilometre marathon! Jess ran for 2 hours and 27 minutes. That would have taken incredible dedication, commitment, focus and stamina, just to keep going, putting one foot in front of the other, to run for two and a half hours. Can you imagine how hard that would be?

NEXT SLIDE Today's text calls us to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us." The writer uses imagery of participating in a race to show what the life of Christian faith is like. It is like a marathon we run until the day we get to the goal of our life on earth—the finish line of our heavenly home land.

Running that marathon is hard work in today's world. The place of the church is increasingly viewed as irrelevant in the eyes of society, and its voice increasingly marginalised as people reject the Bible as God's truth for our times. Throughout the scriptures people either welcomed Jesus or rejected him; a theme that continues throughout human history to the present day, so that even families become divided which Jesus himself attests to in today's Gospel reading—perhaps a situation that some of us might know very personally. We struggle with sin and shame. We long for peace and justice in a troubled and unjust world. The church overseas experiences persecution at another level altogether, with church buildings and villages destroyed, and Christians scattered, violently attacked and even killed for confessing their faith in Jesus.

This is the same situation that the early church experienced. They had endured persecution and hardship, and had been scattered throughout the empire, were tiring, fractured and isolated, and flagging in hope. The marathon seemed too hard, too long; the finish line too far away.

So the author of this text wrote to encourage them to keep on keeping on...and to draw inspiration

from key figures of the Old Testament that had gone before them, who triumphed over the odds and accomplished what was otherwise humanly impossible, by trusting God. Faith itself doesn't make things happen—faith trusts that God will make things happen—that he will make a way where there is no way.

There literally was no way for God's people fleeing the military superpower of the day, the Egyptians. Having reached the seashore, it seemed all over. But God made a way where there was no way, and **NEXT SLIDE** by faith his people passed through on dry land. **NEXT SLIDE** It was by faith that God's people marched around Jericho and God made a way where there was no way, bringing the city walls down on the seventh day as they gave a loud shout, delivering the promised land into their hands. **NEXT SLIDE** It was by faith that Rahab welcomed the spies sent to Jericho to spy out the city, hid them under straw on her roof, and helped them escape.

NEXT SLIDE Through Gideon God delivered Israel from the Midianites with a small army of just 300 men—who merely blew their trumpets and held their torches before God threw the Midianite camp into confusion and they attacked each other. **NEXT SLIDE** Barak delivered the Israelites from Sisera's army who had cruelly oppressed them for twenty years. There are the famous figures of Samson and David. **NEXT SLIDE** The mention of those who "stopped the mouths of lions" presumably refers to Daniel who prayed to God three times a day and survived in the lion's den unscathed because an angel of the Lord closed the lions' mouths. "Those who escaped from the sword" is probably intended to bring to mind Elijah's escape from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19:1-10. Others are mentioned like the women who received their dead by resurrection—a reference to Elijah raising the son of the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24) and Elisha raising the boy of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:25-37).

These are not just inspiring stories but involved real people at actual times in history. It was not through their own efforts that they were able to do these amazing things. They were not super-human, just human—flawed, weak, and sinful, all those things that we are. But these martyrs and military leaders, prophets and kings, women and men are among the great "cloud of witnesses" for whom God was present with his people and helped them in impossible situations, making a way where there was otherwise no way. They trusted in God and persevered as he led them through the worst situations to triumph due to his grace and power alone.

NEXT SLIDE That is the message of encouragement for us among God's church today. If God hadn't have miraculously intervened to save and help the faithful from of old, we wouldn't be here today. We are a part of this same ongoing story of God's faithful people. We are a part of something greater than ourselves, a bigger picture, a more ancient yet living story in which we too are key characters in this marathon of faith. The writer offers the encouragement that God gives us the same help through his all-powerful, saving presence with us, too.

When Jess Stenson was closing in on the finish line in Birmingham, she motivated herself by thinking of the marathon star, the late Kerryn McCann running into the MCG to win at the 2006 Commonwealth Games. "I was thinking of Kerryn out there," Stenson said. "...All of that history really turns into strength that we can use to try and continue that history. I so badly wanted to do Australia and my support team proud today."

We—God's small band of followers here at St Paul's Glenelg, who at times may doubt, whose faith may wane, who tire as we put one foot in front of the other in the marathon home—are surrounded by the faithful who have gone before us; those who have run the race, and like spectators cheering on athletes in a stadium, are with us and cheering us on too. The writer to the Hebrews urges us: "...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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the Cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

We often think of this marathon individually. How often do we say “Faith is a personal matter, between me and God.” Well, it is! But today’s text shows us that faith is a communal matter, including the people of faith of all times and places. The writer’s encouragement to us is as a congregation of which he also is a member—“Let *us* throw off everything that hinders.” Jess Stenson and the other athletes removed their tracksuits before running. They didn’t strap extra weights to themselves, but made sure that anything that would restrict them would be removed so as not to hinder them as they ran.

It comes naturally for us to think individually, rather than communally. As we run the marathon of faith, we are not to run as competitors *against* one another, but *with* one another: supporting, encouraging and helping one another, as the children of God whom Jesus laid down his life for. What burdensome weights do we need to put aside that would hinder us from running together, supporting one another until we reach the finish line? Are we trying to outlast others in the church, or even outdo them? It comes naturally for us to put ourselves first, rather than others in the church first. It comes naturally for us to insist on our way rather than work together. It comes naturally for us to be suspicious rather than trust one another. It comes naturally for us to desire control rather than let go and let others. It comes naturally for us to judge rather than to show grace. It comes naturally for us to justify rather than seek forgiveness.

Taking our eyes off of our Saviour Jesus means we will stumble and fall. I imagine I would be completely unfit, unsuitable, unworthy to be in such an event as a Commonwealth Games marathon, unable to complete it. How much less are we worthy and fit for the Kingdom of Heaven by our own strength? Yet so often we run with our eyes fixed on things other than Jesus and his word. When Jess Stenson that she was in the final stages of the race, she focused by remembering that one slip could mean the end: “These roads can be uneven and it only takes one little step for me to land flat on my face and not get up again,” she said. “I just had to deliver myself to the finish line.”

Just as Jess ran the marathon with her eyes fixed on the finish line, we are to run the marathon of faith with our eyes fixed on the finish line, for there is Jesus, who has already completed the race for us. Through Jesus, God made a way where there was no way. He completed the marathon of faith for you by enduring the Cross, from where he proclaimed his work of salvation for the world was done: “It is finished” before breathing his last. It was from there Jesus made a crossing greater than the one through the Red Sea for you, by triumphantly descending to the very depths of hell and rising again. He overthrew a greater kingdom than the earthly empires overthrown: the kingdom of darkness, making a mockery of the demonic realm. Once it was the walls of Jericho that tumbled, but with Jesus’ death on the Cross the Temple curtain was torn in two, giving all people of faith access to the living God and his mercy and favour. Just as God raised children to life, he has raised you to new life when you were baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, joined to Jesus’ death and resurrection forever.

So, fix your eyes on Jesus, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. He still makes a way where there is no way, for his church, until all those he has chosen and made holy will take the victors podium in heaven. Fix your eyes on Jesus by coming to his table, receiving from him his holy and precious blood to wash away all sin. As your heart pumps his life-giving blood through your mortal body, his own strength is at work inside your weakness—that you might faithfully endure and run the race marked out for you, and one day see that which you hope for. The marathon is impossible by human strength alone. **NEXT SLIDE** But by keeping your eyes on the Cross the victory is yours. You share in Jesus’ own life, death, resurrection and ascension, and will join him at the right hand of God, with all the other saints, and receive from him the victory wreath that he has kept for you, to be yours forever. Amen.