

By Faith

Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

"It is not easy being a Christian today. Defining oneself by one's beliefs and faith can be challenging socially. Friends may not understand. Relatives may look with concern. Colleagues may ask why we are willing to give up some of the earthly goods for the sake of something or someone that is difficult to see or experience."ⁱ How many of the people that you know and spend time with at work or socially know that you are a Christian and will be in Church this morning?

I was called to the ministry and became a Christian at the same time. I reckon it was the only way God thought He could keep me honest! I remember the stunned silence and incredulity of friends at the time. It's a bit discouraging after over four decades that some are still stunned, silent and incredulous!

We see a lot of discouragement within our churches today. Declining and aging attendances. Where are the 'young people' (that's anyone under 65)? Superfluous buildings. A lack of willingness to volunteer. We see a lot of discouragement in the world today. A convicted felon and a war criminal meet in Alaska to decide the fate of Ukraine without the Ukrainian leader and people being present. The land once called Holy riven with a lust for war and vengeance, whilst not only the guilty but disproportionately the innocent suffer so cruelly. The forgotten famine in South Sudan. The simmering tensions around migration in our own country. When is the safety and peace and provision for those in greatest need going to sweep on to the news we see and hear every day, and become reality?

Today's faithful believers are not alone in their sense of discouragement. In the 8th BC Isaiah wrote about the state of ancient Israel, with its anguish of disappointed expectations. God the

Gardener had done everything right for His people Israel, the vineyard mentioned, but they remain perverse and ungrateful. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, writing to a group of Christians somewhere in the Roman world at the end of the C1st AD who were equally discouraged and uncertain about what the future would hold for them. It was hard to keep going. All they could see and hear was the bad news and a life that felt full of fear.

"Under the pressure of testing and suffering, the naked eye can see only the oppressor. We can see only the jackboot of tyranny, or the scars of child abuse, or the x-rays with the spot on the lung. Faith sees all that; it does not pretend there is no (bad guy), no evil, no disease. But faith also sees God, the God Who promises to bring an end to all that harms and destroys, the God Who provided (Jesus, our Hope)."ⁱⁱ God also provided a 'great cloud of witnesses' so that we might learn from others, their hopes and fears, their disasters and triumphs, their stumbling and picking themselves up. Their perseverance in the face of everything when the temptation to give up and go home was great; but they couldn't, and wouldn't, and chose, somehow, to soldier on with no great certainty of success. Simply the belief, the faith, that managed to keep them going until things got better, marginally or magnificently.

Anybody watching the commemoration of VJ Day last week and seeing those veterans in their nineties and hundreds standing or being wheeled to events, so that they could remember those who had not made it in the savage lottery of wartime where who lived and who died had no logic or fairness, could not have failed to be moved and inspired. Those veterans who may have time in Japanese concentration camps, like Eric Liddell, or building a monstrous railway through Burma. Over 90,000 British troops were casualties in the war against Japan - 30,000 died and 37,500 were held as prisoners of war. For hundreds of thousands of service personnel from Britain and the Commonwealth it would take many months to be reunited with loved ones, some of whom they

hadn't seen for more than five years. Many felt that they had been forgotten, despite their courage and sacrifice. Those who did return often found it difficult if not impossible to tell their stories. We remember those who died, and those who survived, and their families today.

Just as we remember the personnel in the European and African campaigns, not only the nations who are at the forefront of Remembrance events, but equal allies who fought and died alongside us: the Poles and the Dutch and the Belgians and the Yugoslavs and the French. Not to be discounted or forgotten, but women and men who had a faith in freedom, a faith in hope, a faith that helped them persevere through the darkest of days.

They were not alone, and we remember them and honour them today.

To encourage the discouraged, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews recounts the history of believers. 17 times he writes, "By faith". By faith the named and the unnamed, never living to see the advent of Jesus, kept on believing so that the chain of faith would be forged link by link and people could draw strength from the knowledge that they were not alone. Faith allowed them to see beyond what was right in front of them, their daily problems, their suffering. Faith helped them to see what God had done in the past, and was doing in the present, and what God had still to do in the future. Faith helps put all of existence, the good and the bad, into the perspective of eternity and to know, yet again, that we are not alone. The faithful might be wanderers in the deserts of life, an image as powerful in our urban, driven, manic generation now as it was to those in ancient times. The faithful might be the named great heroines and heroes from the Bible, and from the history of the Church. But also, the greater cloud of witnesses not named, but as much a part of that great chain of belief who kept the faith and persevered, leaving barely a fingerprint on time, but whose cumulative faithfulness enabled us to be here. All that faith, all that suffering,

all those endless miles of journeying, but keeping on the road of trusting faith, because God walked with them. It is to them that we are linked today. By faith.

John Baillie, an eminent Scottish theologian, professor, and former Moderator, who once lived at the beginning of the C20th, at 21, Braidburn Crescent, just along from the manse, compiled a *Diary of Readings* in 1955. He quoted Gregory Dix, a C20th British monk:

To those who know a little of Christian history probably the most moving of all the reflections it brings is not the thought of the great events and the well-remembered saints, but of those innumerable millions of entirely obscure faithful men and women, every one with his or her own individual hopes and fears and joys and sorrows and loves - and sins and temptations and prayers - once very whit as vivid and alive as mine are now. They have left no slightest trace in the world, not even a name, but have passed to God utterly forgotten by men. Yet each of them once believed and prayed as I believe and pray, and found it hard and grew slack and sinned and repented and fell again. Each of them worshipped at the eucharist, and found their thoughts wandering and tried again, and felt heavy and unresponsive and yet knew - just as really and pathetically as I do these things. There is a little ill spelled ill-carved rustic epitaph of the fourth century from Asia Minor:- 'Here sleeps the blessed Chione, who has found Jerusalem, for she prayed much.' Not another word is known of Chione, some peasant woman who lived in that vanished world of Christian Anatolia. But how lovely if all that should survive after...centuries was that (you) had prayed much, so that the neighbours who saw all (your) life were sure (you) must have found Jerusalem!^{lvi}

'By faith'. The characters of the Bible. Chione from C4th Anatolia. Eric Liddell, a Scotsman born and dying in China. And you, and me. Links in the great chain of belief, of faith. Persevering with

Jesus in the great race of life. Fit or sedentary, youthful or aged. Persevering with Jesus in a culture where waiting and long-range planning are foreign concepts. Holding out with Jesus for God's ultimate promise of salvation and hope and new life. That's why they did it. That's why we do it. For the better life. For the greater good. By faith.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ David E Gray, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol 3* p352

ⁱⁱ Tom Long, *Interpretation, Hebrews*, p122

ⁱⁱⁱ Gregory Dix in John Baillie, *A Diary of Readings*, Day 64