

St Matthews Sermon - 10 am, 14th August 2022

Hebrews 11:29 -12:2, Luke 12:49 -56

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

How is your memory? Some of us have phenomenal memories - I can remember a page of my O level biology notes very well - but I cannot remember a single mobile phone number - not even mine. I have recently started learning Welsh - yes, I know I should get out more - and while I enjoy a daily ten minute lesson on my phone, I struggle to remember the basics between times. Learning the language of the land of my fathers - and mothers - is going to be tough.

What do you have no trouble remembering - and what is impossible for you to keep hold of for more than five minutes? Obviously I can remember book titles and such like from years ago, just like Peter can remember train routes - maybe it's something to do with what we really care about?

The Israelites, the Jews of biblical times, were always concerned with memory, the recording of what had gone before in the history of their people. They care deeply about it - there were traditions and stories that meant a great deal to them - and it was written down carefully and much studied. It was a record of false starts, challenges they had faced and so much more - but most importantly, it was a record of God's involvement in their history. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was fully aware of this, whoever they were, and used it in their argument.

They give the Greatest Hits of history - mentioning names Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and all the prophets. The main events - the Escape from Egypt, shutting the mouths of lions and so on are all mentioned. All the terrible fates of the faithful are carefully listed, all those who suffered for their faith. And yet, says the writer, none of them received what had been promised. The glory of God in Jesus was yet to come, to be fully realised. They were of glorious,

lasting memory, but not made perfect until Jesus came, suffered on the cross, and took his place by God.

The writer to the Hebrews was arguing that they, and by extension we, are surrounded by such a cloud of Witnesses that we can truly believe, truly accept what they were waiting for, what they believed in at any cost. When I hear the phrase "Cloud of Witnesses" I think of two things - the painting of the clouds of saints coming from Cornwall, where beams of light illustrate churches named for them, and particularly Truro Cathedral. All those men and women, forming a huge cloud of witness to faith, to what God has done.

My other idea is of a novel by Dorothy L Sayers - herself a formidable theologian - called "Cloud of Witnesses" and featuring Lord Peter Wimsey. It is not a serious book in some senses - a country house murder, a sensational trial and of course, the importance of witnesses - in this case who apparently knew something of what had happened, and were willing to swear an oath that they were telling the truth. I don't think I am giving any spoilers when I say that when Lord Peter and some others behave pretty disgracefully in a good way at the end of the novel, the policeman who pours them into a carriage looks about him and says "Thank Gawd there weren't no witnesses". It is important to be a witness, says the writer to the Hebrews, and there are so many to tell the truth about Jesus.

Not that there is much comfort in the gospel reading from Luke today. It talks about the challenge that he brings - fire, a tough baptism, and the stress he is under until everything is completed. He has a clear idea of the trials he is to undergo, and how difficult they will be. Here he acknowledges that to be a Christian may also be difficult, costly, of even the most close of relationships. As you can imagine, there has been a lot of discussion about what Jesus is actually saying here. Does being a Christian, accepting the love of God in our lives, mean that there will be so many challenges? This is not Jesus bringing a new age of peace and light, but of difficulty and challenge. How much of this is relevant to us? Is it really going to be so difficult to be a Christian?

I am not sure what to make of this reading, if I am honest. Being a Christian has brought me strength in times of difficulty, comfort when the world is too much, light in the darkness. Maybe it has made life tricky, given people an idea of what I am like - being married to a vicar does create ideas in people's heads of what I am like; patient, quiet. long suffering and well behaved. No, I am not taking questions and comments at this point. Being a Christian can mean that people make assumptions about us, that we make assumptions about ourselves, and they present a challenge.

Not that Jesus will say that telling the future, prophesying, will be easy. He even says that we cannot tell what is going on at the moment, let alone what the future holds. People at the time were skilled - they had to be - at saying what the weather would be. Today the East Midlands are officially in drought, a significant shortage of water. I don't think Wales is - so maybe I ought to keep practising that language.

We have a huge amount of technology to forecast the weather and all sorts of natural events, but we cannot, any more than the people who originally heard Jesus, do very much. For example, a friend who farms in Suffolk says that they have had only 6% of the average rainfall they would expect, and accordingly he got his harvest in several weeks early. The heat, the rain, the natural world, is perhaps beyond our control, even in a world with technology that no one even 200 years ago could predict, let alone 2000. We live in different world in some respects, but a similar one in others.

So perhaps there are few comforting words in today's readings. Except, perhaps that we are of the blessed generation who can know about Jesus and God's plan, that we can live as if we know about them, and we can choose to involve ourselves, believe in the basics of Christianity, and maybe even be part of the witnesses to what faith means to us.

Julie Barham, 14 August 2022