

Look to Jesus (Hebrews 12.1-2)

The second part of a sermon preached at Pleshey on 19/03/14 to mark the 20th anniversary of Ministry Today

This morning I want to direct your attention to the familiar words of Hebrews 12.-2: “Let us run with perseverance the face that is set before us, looking to Jesus (*aphorountes eis Iesoun*). For those of you who did Greek, you will realise that we have here a present participle, dependent upon the main verb *trechomen*: ‘Let us run the race with perseverance, and as we do let us keep looking to Jesus’.

The race in question is the marathon. A marathon by definition a long-distance race. At this point the runners have just entered the stadium. The “crowd of witnesses” (12.1) are in their seats; or rather they are out of their seats; they are standing up shouting, urging the runners. The marathon now turns into a final sprint: the runners are giving their all, straining with every sinew to get to the tape. Have you got the picture? Incidentally, the Greek word used for this race is ‘*agon*’, the word from which we get our word ‘agony’ – a fitting description for this stage of the race where every muscle is now aching. William, you have completed the London marathon: you must know something of the pain of the final 100 yards.

Let us run “with perseverance” (*hupomones*). The GNB translates ‘determination’, but there is more to the word than that: it involves ‘endurance’. Goodness, can’t you begin to see the parallels to ministry here. Yes, I know that this was a letter written a long time ago to a church, or to a group of churches; but how this passage is so applicable to us ministers. Or if not to you, then to me. For I have been in this race for 43 years. Or is it longer? In one sense I began the race when I was baptised at the age of 14 on Sunday 17 November 1957, just a stone’s throw from the river Limmat where the great Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, had drowned the Anabaptist women. Or did the race begin that Sunday evening when at the age of 8 I knelt down and asked Jesus to come into my heart to be my Saviour and my Lord? But in the context of ministry, it was at the age of 25 the race began. And here I am in the stadium – just finished. Or have I? Does the race continue? Do I still need to pull out all the stops for Jesus? Do the retired just free-wheel? Or do they still need to go all out?

Forgive my preoccupation with self. Let me seek to apply this Scripture to you. None of you are at the beginnings of the race; although some of you are further ahead of others. One of the challenges of the ministry is to keep going all out for Jesus. We begin with youthful enthusiasm. I remember when I was President of the Robert Hall Society, the Cambridge University Baptist Society, we talked about the possibility of going as a group, all 70 of us, to Brazil and forming a large missionary community there. Those were the days when on a Sunday we began with a prayer meeting; we then went to church; afterwards we had lunch together; later we had a tea –time meeting; then I would often attend an ordinary 6.30 evening service; after which I would either go to the CICCUC sermon at Holy Trinity to hear John Stott or I might wander across the road to the University Church of St Mary’s and hear Martin Niemoller. We were committed!

But the commitment tends to wane. Let’s face it, the older we grow, sometimes the flabbier we become. Not just physically, but spiritually too. We become cynical and half-hearted, and begin to through the motions of religion. Or at least, that is the danger. The number of ministers I have met for whom ministry has just become a job.

Let me go back again to Hebrews 12. Let us run...”looking to Jesus” (NRSV). The GNB translates: “Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus”. A better translation is ‘looking alone to Jesus’. Let me quote Ben Witherington: “When combined with *eis*, the verb *aphorountes* in Hebs 12.2 means a definite looking away from other things and a fixing of one’s eyes on only the goal”.¹ Peter T. O’Brien in his commentary says something similar: “The author’s appeal calls for concentrated attention that turns away from all distractions with eyes only for Jesus”.² He goes on: “The verb occurs in the description of the Maccabean martyrs who “avenged their nation, looking to God, and enduring the torments to the point of death” (4 Maccabees).³

Focussed concentration on Jesus is what is in mind. It is what William Lane called “contemplation of Jesus”.⁴ I am reminded of the Roman Catholic custom of the adoration of the host. If you go into a Roman Catholic cathedral on the continent, you will see people kneeling before the altar, and staying there on their knees, adoring the host. As Protestants we may not adore the host, but surely we too must learn to adore the Saviour, to focus on him, to concentrate on him. That is what we shall do in a moment when we come to eat bread and drink wine.

Notice that here we are not called to focus on the Saviour: nor on the Lord, nor on the Christ nor indeed on the Son of God, but on Jesus. “The use of the simple personal name 'Jesus' shows that the accent is upon his humanity, and especially his endurance of pain, humiliation and the disgrace of the cross”.⁵ Jesus, in the very way in which he lived life God’s way, has set us a pattern for our living. We need to keep on looking to him, and in looking begin to “imitate” his life.

The medieval German mystic Thomas a Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, one of the greatest manuals of devotion, which has gone through over 2000 editions and printings. Thomas began his book by quoting the words of Jesus in John 8.12, “Whoever follows me... will never walk in darkness”, and wrote: “By these words, Christ urges us to mould our lives and characters in the image of his, if we wish to be truly enlightened and freed from all blindness of heart. Let us therefore see that we endeavour beyond all else to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ”. Here are words for us evangelical Christians to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest”. Our temptation has sometimes been to spend all our energies wrestling with the great Pauline doctrines of justification and sanctification, and not spending sufficient time meditating on the life of Christ himself.

But there is more than simply focussing. To quote PT O’Brien again it is a “looking away from all others toward one”.⁶ When I read those words I was reminded of a key ministerial sin: here I have in mind not sex with the organist, but envy of other ministers. Friends, I have suffered from that. I too have been guilty of comparing myself with others. I have not always focussed on Jesus. I have sometimes allowed my gaze to wander elsewhere.

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Apollos, Nottingham 2007) 327.

² Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 453

³ Peter T O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*. 453 n33

⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9 – 13*, 410

⁵ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 410

⁶ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* 453

Let us keep looking – present tense - to Jesus; looking not just in the sense of focussing upon him, but looking to in the sense of ‘relying upon Jesus’; looking to Jesus for help and strength. My mind goes to what the writer of this letter has to say about Jesus our great High Priest: “Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin. Let us have confidence, then, and approach God’s throne, where there is grace. There we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when we need it” (Hebs 4.15-16). I wonder, is there a word here for some of us as we come to the Table?

Let me close with Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in *The Message*: “Keep your eyes on JESUS, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed - that exhilarating finish in and with God - he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s THERE, in the place of honour, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. THAT will shoot adrenaline into your souls”