

Sermon based on Hebrews 11:29-12:2 and Luke 12:49-56

As some of you know, I'm half way through a two year training to be an LLM, a Licensed Lay Minister, in the Church of England, based in Cottenham and Rampton.

Sometimes that role is known as Reader and sometimes described as 'lay theologian'. That is a very scary title to live up to! Especially when you're on only your third sermon and you find you have to preach on some Bible texts like today's.

They are really strong stuff. Especially the Hebrews passage.

There we heard about fire, drowning, battles, killing, lions, swords, torture, mocking and flogging, chains and prison, stoning and wandering in the desert in animal skins. Even being sawn in two, which in some traditions is said to have happened to the prophet Isaiah. And all those men and women from the Old Testament, human beings who sometimes did terrible things but also, through faith, did God's work.

Then there's the shorter, but no less difficult, Gospel text from Luke.

In that we have Jesus telling us he's come to bring fire to the earth and make family members turn against each other. Finally Jesus accuses us all of being ignorant hypocrites! They are harsh words from Jesus. Here he is definitely not being gentle, meek and mild.

How do I make sense of all that and, more to the point, then turn it into an encouraging sermon? How do I apply the meanings to today, here in Cottenham? Firstly, it is useful to put these passages into context.

The whole of Hebrews is not actually a letter like others in the New Testament. Scholars say it is a long sermon about faith, suffering and endurance. It's about the promise that God gives the new Christians of the 1st century. That promise is in the person of Jesus.

Also, the passage from Luke is part of a sequence of parables and stories that Jesus told about being ready for God, to repent because judgement was coming. A couple of weeks ago we had the story of the rich fool, storing up riches for himself and then losing everything. Then there is the reminder to follow the example of birds and flowers. They do not worry about possessions but rejoice in their existence. Then Luke tells the story about servants keeping watch for their master who will return

from a wedding banquet. The wedding banquet is a common image in the Bible for the final coming of the Messiah.

How does all this help with my sermon today? Walter Brueggeman says about sermons: *'folk should go away changed, perhaps made whole, perhaps savaged'*. Well, both today's Bible readings contain some pretty savage words. But I hope with this sermon to focus on positive change, on being made whole.

Pretty obviously, both readings remind us that a life of faith can be difficult. That's clear from all the examples of life in the Old Testament and in the time of Jesus.

In the recent Holiday Club in Cottenham, the children learned about Bible children, mainly in the Old Testament, who faced big challenges. Children today also face difficult times, however much we may look after them. If you're a child, someone you love very much may die unexpectedly. Other children or adults may laugh at you for going to church or talking about Jesus. And of course, children and adults of faith in war-torn countries today see terrible things and have to deal with physical danger.

Also, as in the Luke reading, following Jesus and believing in God does often split families. Children, teenagers and adults who become Christians today may face opposition in their own families. Jesus himself had mixed encounters with his own family. They had their own expectations of what he should be and do. He had to hold fast to his mission, to complete what God wanted him to do.

All of us will almost certainly, at some point in our lives, go through difficult times. That can mean physical or mental pain, loss, betrayal or other experiences. So we might think it's ridiculous to think that the example in Hebrews of running a race could apply to us. Especially when we have lost energy or mobility. But that image of competitive sport was a common one in the Bible: 'let us run with perseverance the race' and 'lay aside every weight'. There's even one a bit later in Hebrews chapter 4 about boxing.

So here's an example from the 21st century. At the beginning of this month did you see the story and the pictures of the 55 year old woman, the ultra-runner Sharon Gayter? She became the fastest woman to run from John O'Groats to Land's End. She ran 822 miles, in 12 days, 11 hours, 6 minutes and 7 seconds. She got only about 90 minutes to three hours sleep every night. At the end of the run on 2nd August, she said she *'felt about 105'* but was *'relieved'*. She was looking forward to

having her first shower in nine days. She was not looking forward to going back to sitting at a desk at work. Why did she keep going? Partly to push herself to her limits because, in her words, *'you never know what's round the corner, like road closures'*. She also said: *'I'm getting on now and I keep thinking that I can't do any more, but the body surprises me that it can. And while I can still do it, I will'*.

The other reason was to get sponsorship money for the mental health charity MIND, in memory of three of her friends who took their own lives. So her motivation was not all about herself, but how she could help others.

We can't all run like Sharon Gayter but all our own journeys through life need perseverance and endurance. As she said, you never know what's round the corner.

There's a new book called 'God in Pain' by the great American preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor. It's subtitled 'the mystery of suffering'. She tackles head-on the fear and despair that can come with extreme pain and loss. In her chapter on 'Pick up your cross' she says that Jesus dares to say to us: *'Stop running from your cross. Reach down and pick it up. It isn't nearly as scary once you get your hands on it and no-one is asking you to handle it alone. All you have to do is believe in God more than you believe in your fear'*.

You probably know people who do that. I know there are people here today who do that. Let them know how much they inspire you.

Finally, I think both today's really quite difficult readings are about making a whole life change. About gaining strength through weakness because we have been given the amazing opportunity to become more and more human in the body of Christ.

These are ways that our lives can change.

- Accept that our human life can be difficult. Sometimes extremely tough.
- Learn from other people of faith about persevering, keeping going.
- Interpret the past, present and future as Jesus taught us.

The life changing moment is realising what Jesus's ministry was all about. Keeping going, looking ahead, trusting in God's promise of eternal life. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor: ***no-one is asking you to handle it alone. All you have to do is believe in God more than you believe in your fear'. Amen***