

Sunday 15 August 2010: Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Living by Faith

Readings: Hebrews 11.29-12.2; Luke 12.49-56

Last summer I spent a weekend with friends in Yorkshire. They have four children, one of whom my godson. Somehow on Sunday morning – before or after our church-in-the-field improvised service, quite possibly after having this Hebrews reading in our service - the conversation got on to martyrs and the nitty gritty of how they died. Wide eyed Cameron, aged six, a scrap of a child of insatiable curiosity and precocious intelligence, wanted detail.

If he's old enough to ask the question he's old enough to hear the answer, was my line of thought. So looking at his mother slightly anxiously and taking a deep breath, I started to explain. Take St Lawrence, who died grilled on a grid iron . . .

We're already well into the great list of heroes of faith by the time we reach this passage in Hebrews, and in my imagination it has now been multiplied after my recent trip to Italy. Never have martyrs looked so beguiling as in the church of S. Apollinaire Nuovo. Martyrs lining up on one wall – headed by our very own Martin of Tours (not a martyr) presenting them to Jesus and the Virgins (also martyrs but we won't go into that) lining up on the other – with almost imperceptibly different attitudes and postures. But equally, never have martyrs looked so grisly – no opportunities to present beheadings, and an unimaginable number of grotesque ways to die, missed.

There is a fine line between drawing strength for our own acts of faith from these heroes and piggybacking vicariously on theirs, missing the key stage of it being our own unknowing, our own giving up of control, our own facing of the apparent failure of our quest, which is required for the journey of faith. And when the line is crossed, magic takes over – it is no longer faith.

The Hebrews passage says that these heroes didn't see the fruition of their faith so that they wouldn't be made perfect (whole) without us. It's a team game, and our faith journeys are linked with each others and with theirs. Though we are running a race, in the metaphor used here, it's not an exclusive competition. You don't need the unique anatomy of a Usain Bolt to succeed. No, we're much more in the territory of what Peter Selby, on our parish day away, called non-competitive specialness. It's a team game, often involving the passing of batons. Today we celebrate a new member of the team in young Hamish – entering his own journey of faith, made possible by the pioneer who goes before us, in these uncertain times to be growing up.

So what does it mean to live by faith? Especially for those of us who might feel rather unheroic, particularly in this great company.

Perhaps this is where the passage from Luke might help us. It is a difficult passage 'I came to bring fire to the earth – and how I wish it were already kindled.' And while there is talk of baptism, we don't easily connect, especially in the presence of a baptism party full of family and friends, with talk of families divided against each other. In fact, when Jesus speaks of his own baptism which he has to go through he seems to be using the word in the sense of its wider meaning of catastrophe or crisis – but of course this is also connected with his own baptism and what we learn from that about our own baptism. And what I want to focus on

today is the idea that the baptismal shape of living is like this: 'Crisis is the edge where change is possible.'

You people – you read the weather but not the signs of the times! Jesus is fed up with people who can look out and try to understand what's going on externally but completely fail to read what's happening spiritually. He shows himself fully in the line of the prophets in doing so, and not least his cousin John the Baptist, who saw the need for repentance through baptism – the edge where change is possible.

This connects with us doesn't it? We're interested in the weather both as Brits and in a time of climate change. To some extent we look at the issues of climate change, and the attitudes and behaviours behind it, but as with all forms of meaningful change there's a point of resistance about letting it change our own behaviour. It's a process. We can see the floods in Pakistan and be so innured that we hardly bat an eyelid at the worst disaster for Pakistan since partition in 1947. How will we respond. We can read the weather and completely fail to see the signs of the times.

At this stage in Jesus's life, he's still in the process of clarifying and understanding what his own crisis/catastrophe will look like. There will be a movement from preaching the coming of fire on the earth in judgement to the taking of that fire upon himself in his death and resurrection. For us that diverting of the fire of judgement will open up the offer of the transforming fire of the Spirit – but of course as the picture sharpens of his offer as Saviour, the closer comes the possibility of judgement if we ignore it. Sitting on the fence no longer an option.

In this crisis, in this catastrophe will be division in response to preaching of the word and whether we choose to follow Jesus. This is THE edge where change is possible. Will we choose to be overwhelmed by the fire of the spirit, or indeed by the death by drowning which is part of the symbolism of baptism. Change always involves the loss of something, death to something. Can we trust that beyond death to ourself is life –real life-giving change?

In what way do we have to die in baptism? Do we have to be up for the trials of the heroes of faith? While I was in Italy, I was jolted in one of the churches by seeing an altar with a very lifelike statue of Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest who died giving his life in the place of one of the Jews in Auschwitz. With his iron rimmed spectacles and short back and sides, and his earnest expression he looked modern but not heroic, and yet. . . through his action of faith he found in that darkest crisis of anti-semitism in the name of Christianity the edge where change was possible. It was his day of remembrance yesterday.

Hebrews encourages us that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. A leader who enables others to follow in faith, rather than the hypnotic mind-controlling leadership of Hitler or even the imperial Roman Dux who blasts us all away with the glory of imperial power.

The most beautiful mosaic for me in Ravenna was the allegory in the apse of S. Apollinaire in Classe. It shows the transfiguration – but not as I knew it. James and John and Peter are pictured as sheep – it's quite shocking really. There are sheep at the top and sheep at the bottom, calling to mind the apostles, the tribes of Israel and us. We are called to the obedience of faith, but not in the blind way of yielding to oppressive institutions and systems and regimes. In this picture there is a vision of where the fire falls and how it burns in the Transfiguration. Here is a crisis on the edge where change is possible - Jesus will go down from the mountain to his passion and death, and his disciples will follow him, becoming most fully themselves and leaders of others – far from passive sheep - in the process. The figures are pictured in the freshest grassiest green of the mount of Transfiguration, with birds and

stones. Somehow we become more grounded, more connected to creation through this transfiguring process. Something else to bear in mind in attending to the signs of the times in climate change.

The fire of destruction and judgement becomes the fire of transformation and transfiguration. The point about the martyrs is that they *get* this, even while going through what very much looks and feels like the first and often not seeing in this life the outward signs of the second. In one way their lives are broken, unfinished fragments – and yet in another they are so outstandingly whole as we look at them.

Then Jesus is the Perfecter too – the Team captain who waits for us at the finishing line, who fills in and fills up the gaps in our faith – where our heroism fails. Who reminds us that it is a team game in which each one plays their part. Be ye perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. We can run the race and cross the line because our inadequacies are covered. We can get on with the task of failing better in our lives knowing that in Christ we will share in the victory through the perfecting of Jesus.

This is what makes an ‘integrated focus,’ a singleness of vision possible, even for those of us easily distracted and naturally ambivalent – for whatever reason – with doubts about our understanding of faith, the way the institutional church is, emotional wounds, scars from life. When we feel very far from heroic, when the struggles seem all too great and when the challenges we face do not obviously have the drama of those of the martyrs. We have to bring it all to our encounter with Christ – and let that be where we hold our gaze, whatever the crisis which is the leading edge of change. We have to let that be the centre which holds the unknowing and allows us to take the next step, when we’re dealing with the uncertainties of living by faith.

Jesus our pioneer gradually lightens his load as he continues the journey until he empties himself completely on the cross. In the journey of faith as we hold that gaze we understand where we need to lighten the load – lose our baggage and lay aside every weight. Do we dare to travel light and not find our security in all the other things we hold on to and in the familiarity of our besetting sins and idolatries? Do we dare to follow him in his pioneering and trust him for his perfecting?

‘Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.’