

Sunday 5th November 2023, All Saints, Matins

Hebrews 11:32-12:2

Fr Tim Carroll

If we have yet to meet, which is very likely as it is only my second Sunday serving here as Associate Vicar, my name is Father Tim. I certainly recognise some faces from last week but please don't test me on names yet!

As I prepared to apply for this role at St Mary Abbots, I did what most people do when they want to snoop about online. I went onto Wikipedia. As I did I was confronted with the many well-known names of parishioners from down the years. It's probably enough to make some take a large gulp and think '*oh this is full on*'. Thankfully I didn't and here I am. Like most Wikipedia entries it doesn't have the ability to give the full picture of all the special people who have faithfully worshiped and served this church and community. Wikipedia only gives the big names.

If you read the letter to the Hebrews, just before it gets to our reading this morning, you'll hear some big names mentioned. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Issac and Jacob, Sarah, Rahab and Moses. But once we arrive towards the end of the chapter we begin to hear about some nameless Saints. Those who had a faith that led them to endure some dangerous and terrifying fates. These unnamed saints have no recorded biographies, but their faithfulness and endurance ripples through time to speak to us this morning.

You could listen to this passage and think these examples don't exactly serve as an appealing advertisement for faith. Do I want to escape the sword? Be mocked and flogged? Imprisoned? Stoned? Or sawn in two? I think if we put that on a banner outside the Church, these kinds of things might not be a helpful as a Church growth strategy.

Having said that, the Hebrew community who this letter was written to, probably did find solace in hearing this. Like many 1sts century converts to Christianity in the Roman empire they were facing hardship and persecution. This is alluded to in chapter 10, '*they were publicly exposed to persecution and abuse*'.

There is much we do not know about the Hebrew community. They also remain unnamed – but their faithful endurance is chronicled here for us this morning. It was not in vain. When we really get into the lives of the Saints, we are often painted with an unexpected picture. It is not one that says that if you go to church everything will be smooth sailing. It doesn't follow the pattern of modern commercialism, x,y or z will make you thin, rich or happy. Christianity and lives of the saints offers us an invitation into a deeper reality. This text is concerned with what is true. It isn't trying to con anyone. For the saints who are named and the saints who are unnamed are commended but none of them in this life received what was promised.

Why? Because God had something better in mind. The incarnate son of God, Jesus Christ, is described as the perfecter of our faith. In this incarnation God is coming to be with his creation. Through the resurrection we defeat all those things that hold humanity and creation back from being in relationship with God and each other while this perfection is still to be fully realised.

We have a picture in our Isaiah reading of a new heaven and new earth. It's also not a glossy advertisement that tells us that if you do this and that you will be prosperous and have also great skin. It is a picture of communal harmony. For the Hebrew communities that suffered persecution, for the named saints and the unnamed saints who are credited with endurance for their faith, for those down the centuries in this place, for those with Wikipedia pages and those without Wikipedia pages. We are all invited into a reality that doesn't cover up suffering but also promises us that we will be together with God and each other through Christ.

That's not to say we are to expect doom and gloom in our everyday lives until some unknown future flourishes. Not expect to be sawn in half or thrown into prison to prove that we are faithful Christians. Although it's probably natural to feel troubled by the examples of suffering we hear in the saints, it also serves to inspire us. It seems Christianity is both troubling and inspiring and sometimes deeply ambiguous. But in the face of this Hebrews account of the saints asks us not to want to escape from it

When I visited the persecuted Church in Laos, our group listened to stories of persecution, as the church leaders told the story they all laughed. It was difficult to understand but there was a sense that within their hardships there was a seeing beyond, a perspective I may never find, something better.

Faith is a stance in the face of life. This is transformative. It's hard to describe as it is a whole soul response. It's our whole being. We are invited to bring all of our selves and enter a deeper reality to deal with the good, the bad, the ugly, the unavoidable. You may be asking questions about life; you may be finding it perplexing. How can we not when we turn on the news? We feel the anxiety of our own lives and the lives of those we are surrounded by, both near and far. Life is deeply ambiguous. It can be tough.

But we are also, as humans, given hints of deep meaning, a sense of transcendent beauty, support from God who never leaves us or forsakes us, who experienced the pain and isolation in the crucifixion. Life does not offer easy solutions, no free lunches, plenty of tension and punishing blows.

But as we hear in the lives of the saints, and in this community now, sustained by God and fulfilled through Christ, we can be seized and energized, day by day in a deeper reality that helps us discover that in the face of hardships – that God is with us and we can hold onto his promises given to us in Christ Jesus. **Amen**